OceanofPDF.com

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERIES BOOKS 1-10

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY TEN BOOK BOX SETS

CINDY BELL

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

Seaside Secrets
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8

Boats and Bad Guys
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8

Treasured History
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9

Hidden Hideaways
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5

Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12

Dodgy Dealings
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17

Suspects and Surprises
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Ruffled Feathers
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19

A Fishy Discovery
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18

Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21

Danger In The Depths
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19

Celebrities and Chaos
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16

About the Author
Also by Cindy Bell

OceanofPDF.com

Copyright © 2021 Cindy Bell

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and locations portrayed in this book and the names herein are fictitious. Any similarity to or identification with the locations, names, characters or history of any person, product or entity is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

All trademarks and brands referred to in this book are for illustrative purposes only, are the property of their respective owners and not affiliated with this publication in any way. Any trademarks are being used without permission, and the publication of the trademark is not authorized by, associated with or sponsored by the trademark owner.

OceanofPDF.com

SEASIDE SECRETS

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 1

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

At first glance the intricate architecture of the roof that rose against the early morning gray sky would take anyone's breath away. The wide eyes of its large attic windows seemed to stare down at the town it resided in, with a subtle affection. The grand, old building was very well known in the small seaside town of Garber. It was the toast of the town in the past, as it was the largest and oldest structure, and had traditionally served as the home of the wealthiest family in town. Over the years, it had changed as much as the town surrounding it had. Garber was a tiny town of only just over two thousand people. Its main businesses were tourist traps and the minimum required to keep a town functioning. It ran the length of a secluded beach, with a bustling town square as its social center.

At one time the quaint environment had drawn the wealthiest of the wealthy, but things had changed since then. Because it was a good distance from anything modern or convenient it had become a less popular destination. The younger crowds wanted to be near nightclubs and the most fashionable stores and restaurants. The older crowds preferred vacationing somewhere more exotic that boasted other amenities, like spas and all-inclusive resorts. Garber fell out of fashion, and seemed to fall out of the progression of time, too. Its buildings began to fade and become run down. Developers were interested in purchasing the properties because it was close to the beach, but the older residents of the town fought against it. They didn't want their town to be bulldozed and turned into a resort or a theme park. Their children moved away to find work, as there was little employment in the town.

The grand, old home that used to be the center of the town, affectionately referred to as Dune House because of its proximity to

the beach, became the prime example of the towns steady downfall. Dune House had been converted into a bed and breakfast by its most recent owners, Beverly and Harry Allen, but it was closed to the public after Beverly passed away. Harry Allen spent the rest of his days as a recluse inside the walls of the home and showed little interest in its upkeep. After his recent death, the town breathed a collective sigh as if this was yet another sign of the town fading away.

Garber had a mayor who decided it was time for their town to have a new outlook. He began rallying to have developers come into the town and take over what properties they could. He began marketing Dune House as an excellent piece of property for the developers. However, before he could offer it up, he had to get in contact with the relative that Harry Allen had willed the property to, a niece who had not seen him in decades, Suzie Allen.

Suzie lived a pretty laid back lifestyle. She had a small condo that she enjoyed decorating. She filled her time with reading novels, and spending fun days out with her best friend, Mary Brent. Suzie had been friends with Mary since they were in high school together. They had remained friends, even when Mary's life grew very busy with marriage and two children to raise. Suzie had no interest in marriage or children, she found satisfaction in working as an investigative journalist for a regional newspaper. She was always investigating something, and coming up with new ideas for stories for the papers to run. However, since the digital age had struck Suzie found journalism to be less about the story and more about marketing. She decided to bow out of the field and pursue her creative side.

Suzie had dabbled in interior decorating, and adored looking into the history of old buildings and how they had changed through the years. She dreamed of restoring an old building. However, in a town as fast-paced and modern as Burlington, she knew there was little chance of that. Not to mention the cost. Her career as a journalist had left her with a comfortable retirement but nothing that could finance purchasing a historical building.

Now in her fifties, Suzie was feeling a little more restless. She had lived in the same place for so long that she sometimes forgot there was an entire world outside the city limits. She was finishing the latest suspense novel she was reading when the ring of her cell phone startled her. She eyed it with animosity. She was at a very

good part in her book and considered not answering it at all. But the ring was persistent. She snatched it up and was happy to see that it was her friend, Mary, calling.

“Hi, gorgeous!” Suzie greeted Mary cheerfully as she answered the phone.

“Oh, Suzie,” Mary gasped into the phone, and Suzie knew right away that this was not going to be a happy call.

“What's wrong, Mary?” Suzie asked quickly. “Is it the kids?” She knew that Mary's children, a boy Benjamin, and a girl Catherine, were away at college. She had stood with Mary the day she had to say goodbye to each of them. Mary's whole life had been built around her children. She had been a housewife since Benjamin was born, and though she was very proud of both of her children starting their own lives, it had been heartbreaking for her, too. Not to mention that she was left to face alone the horrid man she called a husband. Suzie was not a fan of Kent, and she had let Mary know that from day one. But Mary had been in love, and Kent hadn't shown his true colors until after they were married.

“It's Kent,” Mary admitted with a sigh and a sniffle. “I can't believe he's doing this, but he's taking the house, the car, everything.”

“Oh, Mary, I'm sorry,” Suzie said gently. She would never tell her friend, 'I told you so'. Mary had been through so much with her husband, and Suzie knew that she regretted trusting him. But his name was on everything they owned. “Why don't you come stay with me?” Suzie suggested. “Get away from him for a while, we'll get you a good lawyer and we'll fight for the house...”

“No,” Mary said with determination, and a strength in her voice that Suzie hadn't heard in a long time. “I don't even want the house, Suzie. I don't want the car, I don't want anything that reminds me of him. The kids are okay now, they have their own lives, and it's way past time for me to start my own. I'm not going to let him take one more day from me.”

“I'm proud of you, Mary,” Suzie said quickly. “It's time for you to think about you a little.”

“Thank you, Suzie,” Mary sighed and Suzie could hear the hurt in her friend's voice. It broke Suzie's heart to think of her suffering, but it also made her feel excited that Mary would finally have some freedom from a man who had done his best to keep her under lock and key.

“Come over, I've got a bottle of wine with your name on it,” Suzie smiled into the phone, she knew that Mary wouldn't be able to resist.

“I'll be there in ten,” Mary replied before hanging up the phone.

Suzie didn't have a lot of family in her life and she felt very lucky to have Mary. She busied herself getting the wine and wine glasses ready, and completely forgot about the last chapter of her book. When the phone rang again, Suzie picked it up quickly, thinking it was Mary.

“Hey, beautiful,” she said, anticipating that it was Mary.

“Uh, is this Suzie Allen?” an unfamiliar voice asked with a slight stammer.

Suzie winced as she realized she must have accidentally answered a sales call.

“May I ask who's calling?” she countered without admitting her identity.

“This is Bill Cooper, I'm an estate lawyer for your uncle, Harry Allen,” he explained quickly.

“Uncle Harry?” Suzie asked with surprise as she sat down on the edge of her couch. She hadn't thought of her uncle in many years. “Has he passed?” she asked with concern.

“I'm sorry, but yes,” Bill replied with a waver in his voice. “I've been trying to contact you for over a week. I'm afraid he passed almost two weeks ago, from a sudden heart attack.”

“Oh my,” Suzie sighed as she closed her eyes briefly. “I'm sorry, I haven't seen him in so long. I guess I missed the funeral?”

“Yes, again, I'm sorry for your loss,” Bill said in a professional tone. “But I'm calling to inform you that Mr. Allen named you in his will.”

“Me?” Suzie shook her head. “There must be some mistake. I haven't seen him since I was a child.”

“No mistake,” Bill said firmly. “He's left you his property in Garber.”

Suzie was silent for a long moment as she attempted to recall the house he was referring to. “Dune House?” he prompted.

“Dune House,” Suzie said with a wide smile as the memories flooded her. She had called it a castle as a child. “But, doesn't he have any children?” Suzie asked with confusion. “And what about Aunt Beverly?”

“I'm sorry to tell you Suzie, but Beverly Allen died a few years

ago. Harry does have a son, Jason, but he did not leave the property to him, he left it to you," Bill said firmly.

Suzie was stunned by his words. She hadn't thought of Beverly or Harry for a very long time. Harry was her father's younger brother, and they had had a strained relationship. She had heard briefly about a child being born when she was in her teens, but she had never been told about Beverly's passing.

"Well, this is very surprising," Suzie said quietly as she tried to process the idea of inheriting such a large property.

"I'll need you to come to Garber to sign some papers," the lawyer said. "He left you the property, the home, and all of its contents. Will you be able to travel to Garber?"

Suzie hesitated for a moment. She really had no reason not to go. In fact, she had been hoping for something to shake her life up a bit. It might also be nice to meet her cousin and find out what he was like.

"Sure, I can be there this week," she offered as a bit of excitement began to build within her. She felt a little guilty for being thrilled considering that her uncle had passed, but she could barely recall his face, let alone anything personal about him. The house she had stared up at as she had built sandcastles on the beach however, she could remember very clearly.

When Mary arrived at Suzie's condo, Suzie's mind was still spinning with the news of the inheritance, and the loss of her uncle. After her father had died when she was just a teenager, she hadn't kept in contact with his side of the family, considering that he hadn't seemed too interested in keeping in contact with them either. Now, the phone call had stirred up a lot of curiosity in Suzie. She opened the door for Mary with a dazed look in her eyes.

Mary stepped inside with her suitcase and smiled at Suzie. "Are

you okay?" she asked when she noticed the distant expression on her face.

"I think so," Suzie nodded and swept her shoulder length hair back over her shoulders. Since she had started to spot some grays in her forties she had been dying it a brassy gold color that seemed to suit her tanned skin and her bright blue eyes. She felt it was important to maintain a youthful appearance since society seemed to demand it. Mary on the other hand had left her looks up to nature. She had gray streaks running through her auburn hair, which Suzie actually thought made the loose curls of her mid-back length hair even more luxurious. Her deep brown eyes were soulful, and seemed to be holding more sorrow lately than they should have been.

"I'm fine, but what about you?" Suzie asked and hugged her best friend close. In truth, they were more like sisters than friends.

"I will be fine," Mary promised her. They spent the entire night sitting up discussing the past, Mary's children, Suzie's career, and the ending of Mary's marriage. At some point Suzie brought up the property she had inherited.

"What a surprise," Mary smiled at the news. "Are you looking forward to checking it out?"

"Oh, I'll probably just sign whatever papers I need to in order to sell it," Suzie shrugged dismissively.

"But Suzie, this is what you've always dreamed of," Mary reminded her with a frown. "Are you sure you want to sell it?"

"From what he said it needs a lot of work," Suzie sighed as she thought of the beautiful house she remembered becoming run down, but that was how Bill had described it. "I'm not sure I'm up to doing it all by myself."

"You should at least go and see it," Mary insisted. "Maybe it's not as run down as he's saying."

"Maybe," Suzie frowned. "I feel badly that I missed my uncle's funeral. Apparently, he passed away almost two weeks ago. I didn't even know."

"I'm sorry, Suzie," Mary murmured sympathetically.

"I know I barely knew him, but I wish I had thought to reconnect with him," Suzie admitted as she sat back against the couch. "I guess time just gets away from us."

"It sure does," Mary sighed as she took a sip of her wine. "I never thought I'd be in my fifties starting my life over again," she

laughed with a mixture of giddiness and fear.

Suzie laughed with her and they clinked their wine glasses together in a toast to Mary's new life. Then Mary trailed her fingertip thoughtfully along the rim of her glass.

“So, don't let another moment pass you by, Suzie,” she encouraged her friend. “This is a chance of a lifetime. Go to Garber and get to know the house that your uncle lived in, you might be able to get to know a little about him, too.”

“Maybe I will,” Suzie nodded a little and then met Mary's eyes. “But only if you come with me.”

“Me?” Mary laughed a little. “I don't know if I could do that.”

“Why not?” Suzie pushed as her blue eyes began to shine with renewed excitement. “Like you said, you want to get away.”

Mary thought about it for a moment and then nodded slowly. “You know, you're right,” a slow smile spread across her lips. “Let's do it,” she said, her smile becoming a wide grin. “It'll be so much fun!”

“Yes it will,” Suzie agreed and they clinked their glasses one more time.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

The next few days were a whirlwind of packing and getting things in place so that Suzie could be away for an indeterminate amount of time. More than anything she was thrilled to have the time to spend with Mary, and to get her away from the pain that Kent was insisting on inflicting on her. He called several times just to give Mary updates about the legal steps he was taking. Mary ignored the calls at Suzie's insistence. By the time they set out on their five hour drive to Garber, Mary was smiling more and seemed to be looking forward to the journey.

“When was the last time we took a trip together, just you and I?” Suzie asked with a fond smile as they drove down the highway.

“I think it was that cruise,” Mary cringed as she recalled the disaster of a 'girls' vacation they had taken. First there had been the fight to even get Kent to agree to it, then there was the inclement weather that left Mary holed up in the bathroom because of seasickness.

“Ah, yes,” Suzie chuckled. “The cruise that shall not be spoken of,” she grinned around the name they had given it many years ago.

“At least this one will be on dry land,” Mary pointed out with relief in her voice.

“That's true,” Suzie laughed as she turned off on the exit that would lead them to Garber.

“So, you've never met your cousin?” Mary asked as she gazed out the window. “How old is he?”

“In his thirties, I think,” Suzie shook her head. “It's strange to think that I have a relative that I've never even laid eyes on. From what the lawyer told me, he's a police officer.”

“Oh dear,” Mary frowned as she raised an eyebrow in Suzie's direction. “I can remember the last time you were in handcuffs.”

“That was a simple misunderstanding,” Suzie insisted with an innocent smile.

“Mmhm, it was a misunderstanding that got you a night in jail,” Mary reminded her with a soft laugh. “I can remember that phone call in the middle of the night. When I woke up, I thought uh oh one of the kids is in trouble, imagine my surprise when I heard your voice on the other end of the line.”

“It was for a story,” Suzie giggled at the memory. The truth was she had been terrified at the time. She had let her role as an investigative reporter get a little out of control by impersonating a police officer, which apparently other police officers did not take kindly to. In the end she had been released because of her spotless record, but it had been a scary night of staring at the stark white ceiling of her cell and wondering if she was going to have to go before a judge. It had made her far more cautious about the risks she was willing to take to get a story, and what stories she was interested in investigating. After that she stuck to less dangerous stories, keeping her focus on politics and consumer issues.

“Let's make the most of this,” Mary said softly as she continued to gaze through the window. “I'm ready to see what life has in store for both of us.”

“Me too, Mary,” Suzie smiled to herself.

When they arrived in Garber it was early afternoon. The air was laced with the scent of salt, and a hint of rain hanging in the air. Suzie stepped out of the car and breathed in deeply. It made her entire body relax. She had always loved the beach, and had spent many summer days with Mary and her children exploring whatever beach they were close enough to reach. She had always found the sea and the mysteries it held to be enchanting. That was why she had talked Mary into the terrible cruise trip they had taken. Though

Mary had sworn never to set foot on a boat again, Suzie actually missed being out on the open water. It had been very freeing to feel as if she was detached from dry land. Until of course, the storm had hit.

“Wow,” Mary breathed out as she stared up at Dune House surrounded by the deep blue sky of the afternoon. “You weren't kidding about this place.”

“I know,” Suzie sighed as she turned to face it. “It needs a lot of work,” she murmured as she looked from the dangling shutters to the sagging porch.

“No, that's not what I meant,” Mary said quickly as she continued to stare at the building. “I meant it's as beautiful as you described it.”

“You've been here before?” a voice asked from behind both of them, causing Suzie to jump slightly and Mary to squint against the bright sun.

A man in a police uniform was standing before them. He even wore a hat, and a gun in a holster at his side. Suzie felt vaguely nervous when she spotted the handcuffs on his utility belt.

“Once, when I was a child,” Suzie replied as she studied him intently. “You must be Jason.”

“I am,” he replied in a clipped tone. His expression was calm, but his gaze was searching her curiously.

“I'm sorry that I missed the funeral, Jason,” she said softly as she studied the young man. He was in his thirties and quite handsome in his uniform. Suzie could tell that he resembled her father a little around his bold blue eyes, and in the curve of his thin lips. He had that same calm and logical gaze that her father had often worn. She imagined that her uncle must have had the same expression, but she didn't recall it. The only thing unexpected about him was the thick, red hair that peeked out from beneath his hat, which Suzie recalled was the same shade as her Aunt Beverly's. He looked a little uncomfortable as he stood before her, and adjusted the gun in the holster on his hip.

“It's all right,” he shrugged and then hesitated a moment. “I don't think I ever met you,” he said quietly. “I'm sorry I can't recall if I did.”

“No, you didn't,” Suzie replied with a warm smile. “I lost contact with your father and his family after my father died.”

“Oh,” Jason nodded and glanced away, still quite nervous. “I'm

sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, and I'm sorry for yours," she murmured in return. "Losing a parent is never easy."

"No," Jason agreed, his eyes cold as they looked back at her. "It isn't, I'm just here to give you this," he explained as he handed her a small envelope. "I had some of the keys to the house, and also there's some paperwork in there from Bill Cooper. He can't meet you this afternoon, but said he would be happy to meet you tomorrow."

"Thank you," Suzie replied as she took the envelope from him. "It's good to meet you, Jason," she said with a smile.

"You too, Suzie," he replied with a nod of his head.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Suzie laughed, feeling a little flustered. "This is my friend Mary," she pulled Mary over beside her. "She's going to be staying here with me while we get everything straightened out."

"Nice to meet you, Mary," Jason nodded curtly. Mary nodded and smiled in return.

"I'll let you two get to it," he said with a shrug and then started to turn away. He glanced back over his shoulder as if he had just remembered something. "The place, it needs a lot of work. I know there is an offer on the table, a very generous one," he met Suzie's eyes. "It would be best if you settled things quickly."

"Oh," Suzie nodded, a little taken back by his bluntness. He nodded again and then walked off to his patrol car. Suzie glanced over at Mary. "What was that about?" she asked with widened eyes.

"Who knows," Mary shrugged as she and Suzie began walking up to Dune House. "One thing about long lost family, Suzie, there are always things you would prefer not to find out."

"That might just be the case," Suzie agreed as the patrol car tore off down the driveway.

When they made it inside of what was most recently a B & B, Mary and Suzie were both startled by the state of it. Although the outside was certainly untended, there was some expectation that the inside would be a little better. Instead they found layers of dust, furniture covered in sheets, and a kitchen that looked as if it hadn't been used for anything but the microwave and the trash can for years. There wasn't a dish in the sink, but there was still a trash can piled with paper plates, old dinner packages, and boxes from local take out places.

“Hmm, looks like he didn't leave home too much,” Mary said when she opened the fridge and found it nearly bare, aside from a six-pack of beer, with two bottles missing. “Was he a drinker?”

“Honestly, I don't know,” Suzie shook her head as she glanced around. “I was thinking perhaps we could salvage it, but...”

“But what?” Mary asked as she wiped her finger through a layer of dust on the refrigerator door. “Nothing a little elbow grease won't cure,” she smiled.

“Seriously?” Suzie scrunched up her nose. “I can only imagine that the rest of the place is just as bad.”

“Don't think of it as a whole, we'll just take it room by room,” Mary insisted and then reached down to pick up some trash from the floor. “Trust me, I've seen worse disasters than this.”

“Well, if you're game I am, too,” Suzie said with renewed confidence. They worked on the kitchen for a few hours, and then moved into the living room. When it began to grow dark they decided to call it a day. Since there was currently no power to the house they retired to the motel room that Suzie had booked for them. The motel was on the outskirts of town, and there were only a few other cars in the parking lot. It was quaint, clean, and most importantly had comfortable mattresses. They were both worn out from the day and eager to get some good sleep, but the moment they lay down, they also realized they were starving.

“I think I spotted a vending machine in the hall,” Suzie said as Mary sprawled out on her bed. “I'll go grab us something to munch on.”

“Sounds perfect,” Mary agreed with a smile.

As Suzie walked out into the open air hallway that led to both the ice machine and the vending machine she noticed how quiet her surroundings were. She hadn't heard such comforting silence in a very long time. Though the motel was not on the water, she could

hear the distant crashing of the waves. She was so distracted by the peacefulness of her environment that she didn't notice a discarded ice bucket in her path until she struck it with her foot which became entangled in the handle.

“Oops,” she gasped out as she fell forward and braced herself to strike the cold concrete. Instead she landed against the firm chest of someone who caught her in mid-fall.

“Careful there,” he murmured in a deep, smooth voice.

“Oh, thank you,” Suzie said as she straightened up quickly and brushed back a few strands of her hair. She smiled as she looked up into the man's cool gray eyes. They gazed out at her from beneath bushy, brown eyebrows, set on top of a face weathered by sun and wind. He looked to be in his fifties, and though his dark brown hair was thick it only covered a portion of his scalp.

“Are you all right?” he asked with concern, his hand lingering on her elbow as she pried the bucket off her foot.

“I'm fine,” she promised and blushed at the same time. “A little embarrassed, but fine.”

“You're not from around here, are you?” he asked as he took the bucket from her and set it beside the ice machine.

“Is it that obvious?” she asked with a sheepish smile.

“No, it's just that I know every beautiful woman in town, and,” he paused a moment as he looked back at her, “I've never met you before.”

“Aw, quite the charmer,” she smiled at him and shook her head. “My uncle, Harry Allen, was from here,” she explained.

“Oh, Harry was your uncle?” he asked with surprise. “He was a good man,” he said in a softer tone. “I'm sorry for your loss.”

“I appreciate your sympathy,” Suzie replied as he finally released her elbow. “I didn't have the chance to know him well. Were you friends?”

“Not exactly,” he replied and ran a hand along the grizzled slope of his chin. “Harry wasn't really friends with anyone after Beverly died. He kept to himself mostly. But he was always willing to give a helping hand to those in need. At least, before he holed himself up in Dune House.”

“He left Dune House to me,” Suzie said with a slight frown. “I still don't understand why.”

“Oh, I can tell you why,” he said with a nod of his head. “It's to keep it out of the hands of his boy, and that greedy fool we call a

mayor.”

Suzie raised her eyebrows with surprise. “Why would he want to keep it away from Jason?”

“He wouldn't, I'd guess,” the man shrugged and shoved his hands into his pockets. “It's just that Jason has become very close to the mayor, and the mayor wants that property. I'm sure if Jason had inherited it, he would have handed it right over. It's a shame what happened to Harry. He was healthy as a horse the last time I saw him. It's hard to imagine that his heart just gave out.”

“It is sad,” Suzie agreed in a wistful tone. “I wish I had known him when I had the chance.”

“I'm Paul by the way,” he said as he offered her his hand.

“Suzie, Suzie Allen,” Suzie replied and shook his hand. “It's nice to meet you, Paul, and thank you for your help.”

“No trouble at all. If you need anything, I'm staying in room eighteen for a few days. I have a boat on the water, but since the waves have been rough the past few days I'm treating myself to some solid ground,” he smiled a little at that.

“Thanks again,” Suzie said with a nod as she walked over to the vending machine. As he walked away, Suzie watched him retreat through the reflection in the glass in the front of the machine. His words about her uncle made her wonder if that might really have been the reason why Harry had left the house to her. Maybe he was hoping that she would see more value in it than his son did. When she returned to the room with snacks, she found Mary already snoring in her bed. Suzie smiled and covered her up, before settling into her own bed. Despite how tired she was she found it difficult to sleep. Her mind was filled with thoughts of Dune House, of Jason, and of her Uncle Harry.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

The next morning Mary and Suzie woke early to head back to work on the house. On the way to the house they decided to stop off at the local diner to have some coffee and breakfast. When they walked in, the locals looked up at them curiously. Suzie offered a friendly smile as Mary selected a table. They were barely seated when a waitress walked up to them.

“What can I get for you?” she asked in a friendly tone.

“We'll start with some coffee,” Mary smiled in return.

“I'm going to use the restroom,” Suzie said as she stood up from the table. Mary nodded and began perusing the breakfast menu. When Suzie returned from the restroom she nearly walked right into Jason, who was waiting for her.

“Oh sorry,” he said when she gasped. “I didn't mean to startle you.”

“It's fine,” she said quickly. “I just wasn't expecting anyone to be standing here.”

“I saw your car, and wanted to speak with you,” he explained and stepped a little closer to her. “I just want to remind you that if you need help with anything, you're welcome to call me any time.”

Mary was watching from the table they had been seated at. She sipped her coffee as she studied the interaction between the two.

“Jason, do you mind if I ask you a question?” Suzie asked gently.

“Sure,” Jason shrugged and locked eyes with her. She could tell that he likely excelled in his role as a police officer as she had barely seen him blink the entire time they'd been talking. He seemed like a very serious, young man, perhaps with something he thought he needed to prove.

“Why did the lawyers call me?” Suzie asked as she looked

openly back at him. “Why would your father leave the bed and breakfast to me and not to his son?”

“Ah,” Jason nodded slowly. “I guess you really were out of touch. My father and I had a falling out after my mother passed,” he admitted and cleared his throat.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry,” Suzie murmured, though that was exactly what she had meant to do.

“It's okay,” Jason shrugged again as if nothing could disturb him. “My father and I never really saw eye to eye. To be honest, not leaving the house to me was probably the only gesture of kindness he ever offered me. I wouldn't live in that place if someone paid me to,” he paused a moment and glanced over his shoulder before looking back at her. “To be honest, Suzie, you're getting the short end of the stick. My father did leave me an inheritance, what he left you is a rotting pile of junk, and it might cost you more to get it liveable than it's worth.”

“Oh?” Suzie asked, thinking that Jason's opinion confirmed what Paul had said the night before. She was glad that Jason hadn't been left completely out of the will, but she wondered why he had such bad memories about the home itself. “I hadn't planned on just getting rid of it,” she added. “Mary and I are going to refurbish it, once it's fixed up we might decide to sell it. I'd be happy to split the profits with you,” she added in a light tone.

“That's very kind of you,” Jason pursed his lips slightly. “But honestly, I'd rather see the place bulldozed. I'm sure there are a few offers on the table since the property is right on the beach. From what I understand the mayor is even interested.”

“I'm sorry to disappoint you,” Suzie replied in a firmer tone after he mentioned the mayor. “But I have no intention of letting such a beautiful and historical structure be destroyed.”

“Well,” Jason cleared his throat again, and shifted his hand from his hip to the butt of his gun. “I guess that's settled then.”

“It is,” Suzie replied and quirked a thin brow as she tried to figure out exactly what his intentions were. In her experience as a journalist she had found she had a talent for reading people, but Jason was a very difficult read. She couldn't tell if he was angry, bored, or just emotionally repressed.

“I think you might be taking on a bigger project than you realize,” he added with warning in his tone. “But like I said, anything you need, just give me a call.”

“Thank you,” Suzie replied as she smiled at him. “Would you like to join us for breakfast?” she offered.

“Oh I can't, I'm on duty,” Jason shrugged and then smiled. “Thanks anyway.” As he turned to walk away, Suzie noticed the sway in his step. She could tell that he had a very important role in the town by the way the other patrons in the diner looked up at him when he passed by them. He paused at the doorway of the diner and glanced back over his shoulder.

“Suzie, this place is a little different to the big city,” he said calmly. “Remember to call me, for anything,” he added as he met her eyes. Suzie was a little unsettled with the way his blue eyes seemed to bore into her own. Then he was gone, yet again without blinking an eye.

Suzie watched through the window as he started to walk across the street to his patrol car. Before he could step off the sidewalk a sleek, black sedan pulled up in front of him. He paused a moment, then the driver got out of the sedan, walked around it, and opened the rear door for Jason. She watched him place his hand on the butt of his gun again, but just for a moment, before he slid into the back seat of the car. The driver closed the door behind him, and the sleek sedan pulled away from the sidewalk.

When Suzie returned to the table where Mary was nursing her coffee, she felt a little confused.

“Handsome cousin,” Mary said with a smile and a wink as she gestured to the waitress to bring Suzie's coffee.

“Strange is more like it,” Suzie said with a slow shake of her head. “I can't help but get the feeling that there is an awful lot going on in this town, just under the surface.”

“Here we go,” Mary said with an affectionate roll of her eyes. “Once an investigator, always an investigator.”

“Oh foo,” Suzie waved her hand with a laugh. “I haven't worked in a long time, Mary, you know that. The days of me hunting down the story are over.”

“Sure, I can see that,” Mary joked and finished the last sip of her coffee just as the waitress came to refill it.

“It seems he wants the place torn down,” Suzie shrugged a little. “At first I felt badly about inheriting the property, but now I'm rather glad I did. At least we'll give it a chance to survive.”

“Speaking of surviving, we better stock up on provisions before we get to work,” Mary said quickly. “I spotted a grocery store in the

middle of town, we should go by before we head back to the house."

"Good idea," Suzie agreed. "But first, we eat!" she said as she opened up the breakfast menu.

Suzie soon discovered that what the little town lacked in culture it more than made up for in the food it served. She hadn't had anything so tasty in a very long time. She pretended not to know that it was the ample amounts of butter and grease that made it so delicious. As she settled the bill with the waitress Suzie could feel the eyes of some of the locals on her. She smiled at the waitress.

"We'll see you again soon," she said.

"Oh, you're staying?" the waitress asked with surprise. She had curly, white hair that was poofed just enough to make her head resemble a turned dandelion. "I thought you might be just passing through."

"No, we'll be staying for a little while," Suzie said as Mary walked up beside her. "And with the delicious coffee you have I'm sure we'll be back for more."

"Okay then," the waitress smiled, her eyes gleaming with the information she'd received. "It's about time that dusty old place had some real life in it again."

"We'll do our best," Suzie laughed before she and Mary walked out the door of the diner.

Despite their excited chatter on the way back to the house, when Suzie took another look at the house and all of the help it needed, she felt the wind leave her sails a bit. She didn't want to invest a lot of time and money into something that couldn't be repaired. She frowned as she tested some of the wood on the porch.

"I think this will all have to be replaced," she muttered.

"Don't worry about that now," Mary reminded her. "One room

at a time."

From the threadbare, dust-infested curtains to the carpet worn so thin that the bare, wooden floor could be seen beneath it, there was a lot of work to be done. Suzie and Mary were eager to get started.

"Operation sunlight!" Mary declared and began pulling down all of the old curtains. The rooms that had once been dreary and strangled by shadows were illuminated by the bright sunlight that poured in through the windows. Windows that were in dire need of some cleaning themselves.

"It seems as if my uncle just gave up," Suzie said quietly as she tugged a cover off a majestic, old piano that appeared to have been hidden in the corner for many years.

"He was just living between his bedroom and the kitchen, from what I can tell," Mary said quietly as she pressed one of the keys on the piano to see if it was in tune. The sound the piano emitted was jarring, but still seemed to fill the room with a sense of hope.

"Can you even imagine?" Suzie said as she shook her head. "My entire condo could fit in this living room. He had all of this space, and didn't use any of it."

"It must have been lonely to live here after his wife died," Mary said as she glanced around at the floor to ceiling windows and the large fireplace in the center of the living room. "Having space isn't always a luxury," she added. "I remember when my oldest left home for college, standing in the middle of his room and thinking how empty it was."

"But people leave an impression, and even when they've moved on, it still remains," Suzie said as she flipped through some of the music books hidden inside the piano bench. "The more I learn about old buildings and homes, the more I long to protect them from destruction. Once someone lives there, it's not just walls and a roof any more, is it?"

"This place certainly isn't," Mary said with a small smile of affection as she ran her fingertip along a carving in one of the walls. "You know these marks were probably to measure someone's height. It might not have even been Jason's, could have been some other little boy or girl who once lived here."

"We'll have to learn what we can about the place while we're here," Suzie suggested. "All right, let's move this furniture out of here so we can see what we can do about this carpet."

They worked together to move the furniture, most of which was rather heavy. Then Suzie crouched down and began tugging at one corner of the carpet. When she pulled on it, the carpet disintegrated in her hands.

“Hmm,” she said as she glanced over at Mary. “I think we might need a little help with this.”

“I think you're right,” Mary laughed and laid her hand on the mantle above the fireplace. When she did she touched the glossy surface of a photograph.

“Suzie, look at this,” Mary said with a smile as she picked up the photograph.

“What is it?” Suzie asked and stood up, dusting off bits of carpet as she did.

“It's a photograph of the sunrise over the beach,” Mary said with admiration as she showed it to Suzie. “It’s not dusty so it was probably taken recently. If your uncle took it, he must have been a good photographer, don't you think?”

“I'd say so,” Suzie replied in a murmur as she studied the image. The myriad of colors sprawled across the sky were interrupted only by a few sea birds soaring by. “It's beautiful,” she admitted.

“Let's get started on this carpet,” Mary coaxed her. “In no time we'll have this place looking as wonderful as it once did.”

Suzie had a hard time believing that, but she was grateful for Mary's optimism. They worked together to tear up and roll back some of the carpet. Suzie was inspecting the hard wood floor, wondering if she could just polish it or if it would need to be redone, when she noticed something strange about some of the floorboards.

“Look at this,” Suzie said as she traced her fingertips along the thin wood. “I don't think this is sealed,” she frowned as she narrowed her eyes.

“It isn't, look here,” Mary said and pulled a corner of the wood up out of the floor. It was a large square, all one piece that could be lifted out of the rest of the floorboards.

“What's underneath it?” Suzie asked with excitement creeping into her voice.

“I think it's a safe,” Mary said as she looked down at the metal container with a padlock on the front.

“Wow,” Suzie grinned as she reached into the hole the safe was hidden in and rocked it a little to see if it was loose. “I think I can

lift it right out...” she started to say and then lifted the safe out of the hole. She set it down on the floor next to her.

“It's not too heavy,” she said as she tugged at the padlock on the front. “But I don't think we're getting in here too easily.”

“I think I spotted some bolt cutters in the hall closet,” Mary said and hurried off to get them. When she returned with the bolt cutters Suzie hesitated.

“Do you think we should open it?” she asked with a frown.

“All of the contents belongs to you,” Mary reminded her.

“I know, but it still feels strange,” Suzie admitted. “I guess it wouldn't do any harm to see what's inside.”

It took a few attempts but she managed to cut through the lock. When they opened the safe they found very little inside. There were a few stacks of legal papers as well as a small key.

“What do you think this belongs to?” Suzie asked as she held the key up to the sunlight drifting through the windows.

“Only key I've seen like that belonged to a safety deposit box I had,” Mary said as she studied the key as well. “It looks like it might have the initials of the bank on it.”

“Here, look at this,” Suzie said as she pointed to one of the papers in one of the stacks. “It lists the bank and box number.”

“How interesting. It seems like a lot of effort just to keep a key safe,” Mary said thoughtfully. “I wonder what's inside the safety deposit box.”

“Well, whatever is inside the safety deposit box would surely belong to Jason, so I guess I should call him and let him know that we found the key,” Suzie suggested with a slight shrug as she fiddled with the business card that Jason had given her.

Despite the fact they were cousins, Suzie felt a little uncomfortable around Jason. If only she could pin down his intentions, and read him as easily as she could other people, she might feel a little more secure.

“You give him a call, and I'll finish rolling up the rest of this carpet,” Mary offered as she brushed some dust off the knees of her jeans.

“I don't want you doing all the work, Mary,” Suzie warned as she glanced guiltily over at her friend.

“Suzie, this is the best thing for me,” Mary assured her as she got back down on her knees to roll the carpet. “I've always found focusing on a task to be the best time to sort through things in my

mind. It just seems easier to figure things out while my body is busy doing other things."

"Just don't overdo it," Suzie warned her as she pulled out her cell phone.

"I'm not dead yet," Mary winked at her. "In fact, for the first time in a very long time, I feel very alive."

Suzie smiled at that. It reassured her to think that something about all the work they were doing was creating some kind of healing for Mary. As Suzie dialed the number on the business card she stepped outside onto the wraparound porch to make the call. As she walked around behind the large building she found herself awestruck by the deep blue of the water against the pale blue of the sky. It seemed to grab the core of her and give it a sharp shake to see something so beautiful. It wasn't that she hadn't seen beautiful things before, but the combination of the salty air, and distant intangible memories of her youth was a powerful force.

"Hello?" Jason's voice jarred her from her thoughts. She blinked twice before she even remembered that she had called him.

"Hi, Jason it's Suzie," she paused a moment and then added. "Your cousin."

"I remember," Jason chuckled a little into the phone. "What can I help you with?"

Suzie smiled at the question. It was endearing for someone to automatically offer to help.

"Actually, I think I have something that might help you," Suzie replied as she flipped the business card between her fingers. "Mary and I were pulling up the carpets in the living room and we came across a hidden safe. Did you know about that?"

"A hidden safe?" Jason repeated hesitantly. "I've never known my father to have a safe."

"Well, it was there," Suzie replied. "Inside were only some documents regarding the property and some old vehicles, but also a key to a safety deposit box."

"Oh?" Jason's voice had dropped in tone quite a few octaves.

"Well, your father left the contents of the house to me, but I'm sure he intended for you to have whatever was in the safe and the deposit box that this key must open," she explained. "So, would you like to come pick it up?"

"Uh, at the house?" he asked, his voice still awkward.

"If you don't mind," Suzie replied with a touch of confusion. "I'm

covered in dust and carpet fibers, so I'm not exactly presentable to the public. If you'd rather I could meet you somewhere later after I've had time to clean myself up."

"No," he paused a long moment and Suzie wondered if the call might have been dropped. Right when she was about to check the connection, he spoke up. "I'll come over," he replied reluctantly as if it was the worst thing he could imagine. "Just, do me a favor and meet me outside, okay?"

"Sure, Jason," she replied with a softer voice. "Just text me when you get here."

"I will," he replied before hanging up.

Suzie stared down at the phone for a moment. She found it very odd that Jason was so opposed to stepping into the house. She had just been marvelling over the beauty that could be seen from the porch she was standing on, but Jason acted as if he'd rather be anywhere else on earth. She could understand that since his father had recently passed in the home there might be some underlying grief that caused his dislike of the place, but still, something seemed off about it. When she walked back into the living room she found that Mary had already rolled up the remainder of the carpet.

"Wow!" Suzie exclaimed with a laugh, her blue eyes dancing as they swept over the bare wooden floors. "If I had known you could do all this yourself I would have been sitting on the porch with an iced tea."

"Ha, ha," Mary panted out as she struggled to her feet. "I think I might have overestimated the youth of my back."

"Well, then it's to the porch with you, young lady," Suzie said sternly. "I'll bring you some iced tea. You will not believe the view," she sighed with pleasure at the recollection of it.

"Did you talk to Jason?" Mary asked as she dusted off her hands.

"Yes," Suzie replied and bit her lip lightly as she wondered if she should share how strange she found her cousin. "He's going to come by to pick up the key," she finally said. She didn't want to continue to question Jason's behavior. He had just lost his father after all, and had no mother to turn to either. In fact, in Suzie's estimation, she was probably Jason's closest living relative. She didn't want to alienate him just because he wasn't grieving the way she expected him to. "Go on out," Suzie encouraged Mary. "I'll meet you out there."

When Suzie stepped out onto the porch with a glass of tea in

each hand, she found Mary gazing with a dreamy smile on her lips at the ocean stretched out before her.

“How could anyone give this up?” she asked quietly as she accepted the glass of tea from Suzie. “I think I could stare at the ocean forever.”

Suzie rubbed her friend's back lightly and smiled sympathetically at her. “I know this is still hard for you, Mary,” she said gingerly. “I can't tell you how much I appreciate your help.”

“I can't tell you how much I appreciate being here,” Mary replied as she took a sip of her tea. “You always seem to know exactly what to do.”

“Ha,” Suzie rolled her eyes at that and leaned against the railing of the porch, with her back to the ocean. “If only that was the case,” she smiled as nostalgia flooded her. There were a lot of turns in the road of her life that she would have preferred to have led down different paths. But as she glanced over her shoulder at the rolling waves and the slowly setting sun, she was certain that despite the missteps, she had landed exactly where she was meant to.

“Hello?” Jason's strong voice called from around the corner of the house. Suzie straightened up and set her glass of tea down on the flat surface of the wide railing. She walked towards the sound of Jason's voice.

“We're back here,” she called out as she walked around the corner of the house to meet him. Jason stood tentatively at the edge of the porch as if he expected the wooden boards to collapse beneath him. “I thought you were going to text me?” Suzie reminded him.

“I did,” he replied with a gruff edge to his voice. Suzie slid her hand into her pocket to check her phone. When she found it empty she realized that she must have left it on the kitchen counter while she was fixing the iced tea.

“Sorry, Jason,” she frowned as she met his stolid blue eyes. He only looked back at her expectantly. She gritted her teeth as she realized getting the slightest hint of emotion out of him was going to be like pulling teeth. “Here,” she handed him the key that she had stowed in her other pocket. “I'd be happy to give you the other paperwork that was in the safe.”

Jason stared nervously at the key he was holding between his thumb and first finger. “Honestly, I don't even want this,” he shrugged and started to turn away. “I'll probably just tell the bank

to donate whatever is inside."

"Jason, wait," Suzie reached out and grabbed his forearm gently. He seemed a little startled by her touch, and she was just as surprised by it. Despite Jason being about the age that her own child might be if she had one, she had never felt a maternal pull before. Something about Jason made her want to understand him, and even help him if she could. Perhaps it was because they were family, or maybe it was some irrational need that she hadn't put a finger on yet.

"I just want you to know that if you need to talk," she smiled awkwardly, "I'm here. I mean, there may be some things you want out of the house. Things that belonged to your father, or to your mother," she suggested. She caught sight of a flicker of emotion cross his face when she mentioned his mother.

"There's not," he said sternly and drew his arm from her grasp. "Listen, I appreciate the gesture," he said calmly as he met her eyes. "But I have people I can talk to. Really the best thing for me would be to have all of this off my back. Okay?" he narrowed his eyes slightly as if he was willing to speak in a harsher tone if she pushed him.

"Okay," Suzie nodded slowly, though she wasn't sure if she understood. As he walked away, Suzie could tell from the tension in his shoulders that she had ruffled some feathers. She was ready to believe that Jason was one mystery she was not going to be able to figure out.

"Well, isn't he pleasant," Mary said as she walked up behind Suzie with her glass of iced tea. Suzie laughed a little as she took the glass of tea and they both watched Jason climb into his patrol car.

"Well, he is a police officer, maybe he just has to have a tough attitude," Suzie shrugged.

"Hmm, I don't think so," Mary said as she watched Jason tear out of the driveway. "I've seen that look plenty of times. He's hiding something."

"You think?" Suzie asked with surprise.

"All I'm saying is that if I ever saw that look on my son's face, I knew that we were going to need to have a long conversation," Mary laughed lightly and then arched an eyebrow. "I guess they never grow out of it."

"I guess not," Suzie replied with a slight frown. "All right,

enough work for tonight I think," she grinned. "How about I start a fire and we trade in these teas for some wine?"

"Sounds like a good plan to me," Mary agreed.

Once the fire was crackling in the large fireplace, which was in the center of the large living room, Mary sprawled out across one of the three couches in the room. Suzie had found a box of trinkets in the master bedroom and was sorting through them in front of the fireplace.

"These must have been Beverly's," Suzie said softly as she sorted through the collection of handmade crafts. "It's sweet that he kept them for so long."

"How can Jason not want any of these things?" Mary asked with a sigh.

"I'm not going to get rid of them. I'll box them up for him, maybe one day he'll want them," Suzie said quietly. Then she paused as she pulled out an envelope from the box. "Hmm," she glanced up at Mary. "Do you think it would be wrong to read it?"

"Not at all," Mary sat up so she could listen.

When Suzie opened the envelope she expected it to be correspondence between husband and wife, but the letter she skimmed over had nothing to do with that. It was a letter from a father to a son.

"I know dear boy that we have been separated by time and hurt, and I am guilty of always believing that tomorrow would come. However, due to recent discoveries I have made, I fear my time is much shorter than I anticipated. In fact, I fear I no longer believe in tomorrow. I have felt someone watching me, and I know that I have crossed a terrible line. A funny thing happens when you are faced with the end of your life. You begin to think about all the ways you missed out on living it. When your mother died, Jason, I missed an

opportunity to be the father you needed me to be. Since then I have missed that opportunity with each and every day that passed. There isn't time left to express all that I truly feel, but the most important thing that I have failed to convey for so many years, is that I love you. I ask for your forgiveness, without the expectation that it will be given. I ask for it so that you will know that I recognized the hurt that I have caused. All I ask of you is that you find a way to heal and let go of the past. Don't be an old man, in an old house, with an old mind. Live your life, Jason, with freedom and passion."

"Wow," Mary murmured as she listened intently. She smiled fondly at the familiar desire that a parent has for a child, that their lives will somehow be better than that of their parents. "What else does it say?" she asked eagerly.

"Nothing," Suzie whispered as she looked over the letter once more. "It's almost as if he planned to write more, but never had the chance to," she frowned as she tucked the paper back inside the envelope. "I'll have to make sure Jason has the chance to read this."

"I hope he will," Mary said gently and swept her gaze over the grand living room that was painted in subtle reflections of the flame in the fireplace. "I can't imagine how lonely Harry must have felt in his last days."

"But how did he know they were his last days?" Suzie asked thoughtfully. "He says that he made recent discoveries about his life coming to an end."

"Maybe a medical diagnosis?" Mary suggested with a slight shrug.

"Maybe," Suzie hesitated and then shook her head slowly. "Something just doesn't seem right about the tone of the letter. It feels as if he was afraid, not so much of a medical issue, but of a person."

"A person?" Mary scooted to the edge of the couch to look more closely at Suzie. "What makes you think that?"

"I don't know," Suzie shook her head. "Maybe I'm just reading too much into it."

"Well, no matter what inspired him to write the letter, the fact that he did is a treasure. Jason should get some relief from this, if not now, hopefully in the future," Mary murmured and then stretched her arms above her head as she yawned.

"Yes, it sounds like Beverly's death really tore Jason and his father apart. How sad to think that at a time when they needed

each other the most, they were isolated from one another," she glanced over at Mary just as she was finishing her yawn. "I second that," she laughed as she stifled her own yawn. "Let's get some good rest."

They had chosen bedrooms to stay in earlier in the day. The rooms in the home had been quite neglected, but at one time it was clear that a good amount of care had been taken to select decorations and paint colors. Each room had its own theme from nautical, to whimsical, to medieval. It was only noticeable if close attention was paid to the subtle decorations and nuances of the texture of the bedding and walls. They chose two rooms close to each other, as the house was rather spooky in the dark. Suzie chose a room that had a Victorian feel to it with thick, long curtains and a four poster bed. Mary chose a room that had a more Mediterranean theme, with bright colors and simplistic furnishings. Neither of them noticed the décor in either room by the time they fell into bed, exhausted from all the hard work they had done.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

When Suzie's eyes fluttered open the next morning she felt as if she was floating. There was something liberating about being away from home without any set date of return. She found herself looking up at the ceiling beyond the four posts that towered above her bed. The ceiling was weathered but strong and could use a fresh coat of paint. Before she was even up for the day she was already planning what they would attack next in the refurbishing. She walked to the door of her bedroom and listened, but only heard silence. She expected that Mary was still sleeping.

As Suzie stepped into the bathroom attached to the bedroom she could feel the hard work of the day before in the muscles of her upper arms and the strain of her lower back. She was sure that a hot shower would be a good cure for that. She wrapped her hand around the bar of the old handle and turned it. The pipe offered a loud groan and spat out a few drops of water.

“Oh no,” she muttered to herself. She walked over to the sink and turned on the water at the sink. A thin stream of water dripped out. It was obvious that there was some kind of clog in the line. As she gave up on her hot shower she realized that she would need to call a plumber to resolve this problem. She tugged on a robe over her flowing silk, white nightgown and headed back out into the living room. The scent of the fireplace filled the room, still clinging to the furnishings. It was a nice smell, but it did not compare to the heavenly aroma of coffee and toast coming from the kitchen. She found that the counter had been scrubbed, a coffee maker was hooked up and brewing, and the toaster was hard at work as well.

“Mary?” she called out with confusion growing. She had been certain that Mary was still sleeping. But when she looked out of the kitchen window she saw her dear friend standing on the porch that

overlooked the water. Her shoulders were rounded, her head slightly tilted down. She seemed to be savoring her time alone. Suzie decided not to interrupt her, and instead walked over to the kitchen sink to try the water.

“It doesn't work,” Mary said as she stepped into the kitchen. “I used bottled water for the coffee maker,” she added.

“Thank you so much for that,” Suzie said as she cast a smile in her friend's direction. “Too bad we have plumbing problems to deal with.”

“Yes,” Mary sighed and shook her head. “That's one thing we can't handle on our own.”

“Maybe not,” Suzie agreed. “But I don't have to be a plumber to see that there is something wedged in this drain. Will you check in the hall closet, I think I saw some flashlights in there yesterday,” she asked as she leaned down further trying to get a good look at what was stuck in the drain.

“Sure,” Mary said as she walked out of the kitchen and to the hall closet near the entrance of the house. When she stepped back into the kitchen she had more than just a flashlight, she had a camera case in her hand.

“Look what I found,” she said with a smile as she handed Suzie the flashlight.

“A camera?” Suzie guessed with a slight smile.

“Not just any camera,” Mary corrected her. “This is a very expensive model. Your uncle must have been a good photographer.”

“From that photo on the mantle, I'd agree,” Suzie murmured as she shone the flashlight down into the drain. “Hmm,” she frowned.

“Can we get it out?” Mary wondered as she glanced over at Suzie.

“We're going to try,” Suzie replied. Then she began searching around for something that would allow her to fish the object out. She found an old knife sharpener that seemed to be the right size. After wriggling it around for a little bit and muttering under her breath each time she thought she had it, the object slid out of her grasp once more, until she was finally able to pull it up and out of the drain. Once it was out however, it didn't solve any mysteries. It only offered more questions.

“It's a cufflink,” Suzie said as she turned the circular metal object slowly between her fingers. In big, bold, black letters on the surface of the golden cufflink the initials TR stood out.

“Weird,” Mary mumbled as she peered at the cufflink. “But with the long history this place has, I'm sure that we will find many more surprises.”

“Either way, we still need to get a plumber out here,” Suzie said firmly. She pulled out her cell phone and slid the cufflink into her pocket. She would take a closer look at it later just out of curiosity. Once she set up a time for the plumber to come out, she began thinking about the letter she had found the day before. She was wondering if she should call Jason and give it to him when her cell phone began to ring. She saw that it was Jason calling in.

“Hi Jason, I was just thinking about calling you,” Suzie said quickly.

“Can you meet me at the bank?” Jason rushed forward in a quiet tone.

Suzie was surprised by the sudden change in the tone of his voice. All of the certainty and logic that had coursed through his words before seemed to have vanished.

“Of course, I'll be there in a few minutes,” Suzie replied. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine,” he assured her. “Just meet me as soon as you can.”

“Okay,” Suzie agreed and hung up the phone. “Mary, do you think you could handle the plumber while I meet Jason in town?”

“Sure, no problem,” Mary nodded as she continued to shine the flashlight down the sink. “Just wondering if the other one is down there, too,” she laughed.

When Suzie arrived at the bank, Jason was standing outside. It was the first time Suzie had seen him without his uniform, and in jeans and a t-shirt he looked much younger than she had first assumed.

“Hi there,” she smiled as she walked up to him. Jason didn't

smile back, he glanced up at her nervously instead.

“I couldn't open the box,” he said quietly and lowered his eyes.

“Oh Jason, I'm sorry, was it too difficult for you?” she asked with a frown.

“No,” he replied darkly. “My father left a specific note with the manager of the bank, that I should not open the box. He named you as the only person who could open the box.”

“Me?” Suzie asked with a shake of her head. “This is getting a little ridiculous.”

“Not to me it isn't,” Jason said and narrowed his eyes. “This is how he always was. He kept things inside. When my mother died I was away on vacation and he waited almost two days to tell me. Two days of me living my life and enjoying myself, having no idea that...” his voice broke slightly and he shook his head. “Obviously he didn't trust me with whatever is in that box, so here,” he handed her the key. Suzie took it and then studied him intently.

“Do you want to come inside with me?” she offered awkwardly. She had no idea how to react to her uncle's dismissal of his son. She wished she could give the letter she had found to Jason, but she didn't feel as if that moment was the right time. The last thing she wanted was for Jason to throw the letter into the trash without reading it.

“No,” he sighed and then rocked back on his heels. “I'm going to go to the diner and have a nice early lunch, and forget about all of this. Good luck,” he added and turned to walk down the sidewalk.

Suzie stepped into the bank. She hated to think of Jason feeling so hurt, but she was very curious about what might be in the safety deposit box.

When she walked into the bank, the woman behind the counter was smiling in the direction of the door, as if she was waiting for Suzie to enter. Suzie returned the smile, though she was still a little troubled. As she walked up to the curved front counter the woman laid a clipboard with some forms clipped to it in front of Suzie.

“You must be Suzie Allen,” she said swiftly. “I just need you to fill out these forms, and I'll need to see some identification.”

Suzie nodded and began filling in her information on the form. When she finished she handed the woman her ID and then glanced around the bank. It was a quiet place with thick carpets and floor to ceiling double paned glass windows. It had a sterile feel to it, but the atmosphere was courteous.

“All set, Ms. Allen,” the woman said as she returned to the counter. “If you'll follow me,” she opened a small gate in the counter so that Suzie could step through. They walked down a long, narrow hallway to a secure room where the safety deposit boxes were stored. The teller walked over to the wall of safety deposit boxes, found the number that belonged to Harry's, and pointed it out to Suzie.

“I'll leave you to look through the contents, please let me know if there's anything you need,” she said as she walked back out of the door.

Suzie stared at the box, then unlocked it with the key. She slid the metal container out from inside the small space, and carried it to the large wooden table in the center of the room. As she opened the lock on the box, she wondered what would be inside. What she found left her very surprised. Though the box was fairly large and could have contained several different things there was only a single envelope in the bottom of it. It was a thick envelope and felt heavy when Suzie picked it up. She opened the envelope to discover a pile of photographs inside and a USB flash drive.

Suzie lifted the photographs out of the envelope. She laid them in a pile on the table beside the box. When she looked inside she discovered that the photographs and the drive were the only things that the envelope had contained. Puzzled, she looked back at the photographs. She expected to see a young Jason playing with his mother, or even some boudoir photographs of Beverly, something that someone would treasure enough to pay for a safety deposit box to keep them safe.

Suzie picked up the first photograph and stared down at it closely. What she saw were two strangers standing on the beach at night. The man held a bottle of wine in one hand, and was dressed in a nice suit. Beside him the woman was dressed in a butter yellow, flowing dress. She was bare foot, with her white sandals clutched in one hand. She was looking up at him, smiling. It felt like a special night between lovers. The man looked to be in his late forties or fifties, and the woman seemed a bit younger.

In the next photo they were strolling along the beach, their arms entangled with one another. In the next photo they were standing about a foot from one another. The man's expression was grim, filled with arrogance and power. The woman appeared to be frightened with widened eyes. Suzie noticed she had dropped her

sandals on the sand by her bare feet.

In the final photograph in the collection the woman had turned away from the man. She appeared to be in mid-motion when the photograph was snapped, as if she was trying to run from the man. He had his right hand on her right shoulder in an attempt to stop her, and still gripped the wine bottle tightly in his left. Suzie felt extremely uncomfortable.

The photographs were professional enough to have been used for some kind of advertising campaign. Perhaps there was a reason behind what seemed to be a romantic evening that turned sour. But the fear in the woman's eyes as she looked at the man towering over her left Suzie feeling sick to her stomach with dread. She gathered the photographs together and tucked them along with the flash drive back into the envelope, which she then stowed in her purse. She put the box back into its slot and then pressed the buzzer for the woman who promptly came and let her out of the room. She walked out of the bank and thought of calling Jason to tell him about what she had found, but she wondered what the point would be. Harry had been adamant about Jason not having them, perhaps because of their disturbing nature.

Suzie couldn't imagine what would possess her uncle to keep the photographs. Had he been the one to take them? She recalled the artistic photograph they had found in the living room, and the expensive camera they had found in the hall closet. It made sense that he would have been the one to take them, as the stretch of beach did seem to be similar to the beach that Dune House overlooked. However, what was the point of the photos? To record a marital spat? Surely that was all it was. The man seemed overbearing and aggressive, and the woman genuinely frightened, but that didn't mean that one moment captured on film had led to anything dire.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

When Suzie returned to Dune House and found Mary and the plumber talking on the porch she briefly forgot about the photographs.

“What do you think?” she asked the plumber, who had the name Lester stitched on his gray shirt. She didn't know if that was his first name or last name, and hoped she wouldn't have to use him frequently enough to find out.

“Nothing to worry about,” he said with a shrug. “Just a bit of a clog, I snaked it out. If it happens again though we'll have to take a closer look at the pipes.”

“Thank you for coming out at such short notice,” Suzie said politely as she pulled out her check book and scribbled out a check for the amount Mary pointed out on the bill of service.

“No trouble,” he shrugged again. “Anything for this old place,” he added as he looked over his shoulder affectionately at the large structure. “It's good to see someone finally trying to work to improve it,” he added with a smile.

Suzie smiled in return as she handed him the check. It was nice to know that Dune House was still valued by some residents in the town. After Lester left, Suzie recalled the photographs in her purse.

“Boy do I have a strange story to tell you,” she said as she followed Mary into the house.

“What happened at the bank?” Mary asked eagerly.

“You wouldn’t believe it but Jason could not access the box. Uncle Harry left strict instructions that I was the only one allowed to open it,” Suzie explained.

“Wow,” Mary gasped. “What was in it?”

“The only things in the box were these photographs,” Suzie replied as she set the stack of photographs down on the large dining

room table that they had yet to polish, “and this flash drive.” She took the flash drive out of the envelope and showed it to Mary and then put it in her pocket. They didn’t have a computer set up yet so they would have to wait until they could look at it.

“Photographs?” Mary asked with surprise and began to sort through them. “How strange,” she murmured as she watched the scene play out in each photograph. “Why would your uncle want to keep these safe?”

“I don't know,” Suzie shook her head. “I was thinking I should show them to Jason and see if he knows the people in the photographs.”

“Suzie,” Mary said softly as she studied the photo of the man grabbing onto the woman's shoulder. “Look at his cufflink,” she said as she pointed to it.

Suzie leaned closer to take a look. “It does look similar to the one we found,” Suzie said quietly as she studied the photograph.

“I found some knick-knacks in one of the kitchen drawers,” Mary said as she walked into the kitchen. She opened one of the drawers and pulled out a magnifying glass. “Do you still have the cufflink?” Mary asked as she handed Suzie the magnifying glass.

“Yes, I do,” Suzie replied and fished it out of her pocket. She laid it on the table so they could both take a closer look at it. Then Suzie leaned over the photo with the magnifying glass. As she held the magnifying glass over the photograph she could swear that she saw initials on the man's cufflink, but she couldn't quite make out the letters. She frowned as she glanced up at Mary.

“I think there is a lot more to my uncle's death than we are seeing,” she shook her head slowly. “At first I thought it was just my suspicious nature getting the better of me, but now I'm certain. Something happened to my uncle, and I don't think it was a death of natural causes.”

“What do you see in the photograph?” Mary asked curiously.

“I can't quite see it,” Suzie admitted. “But I think the man in this photo is wearing the same cufflinks.”

“If only there was a way that we could see the cufflinks up close,” Mary frowned as she scrutinized the photograph through the magnifying glass as well. When she brushed her hand across the cherry wood table, she came back with a palm full of dust.

“I think we had better get to work on some of this cleaning,” Suzie suggested as she tucked the photographs back into the

envelope. “It'll give me some time to sort things out.”

“Good idea,” Mary agreed. “I'll start with the windows so we can get some more light in here.”

“I'm going to work on the furniture,” Suzie nodded. As the two women set to work, Suzie's mind sorted through all that she had discovered over the past few days. One question bothered her, why was it that her uncle didn't leave these clues to his own son, who was a police officer after all. If he had stumbled across something potentially criminal or dangerous, why hadn't he turned to Jason?

“This is odd, Suzie,” Mary called out as she stood in the window that overlooked the beach below.

“What?” Suzie asked and walked over to her.

“See how filthy the windows are?” Mary pointed out. “All but this one patch here,” she pointed to a perfectly clean, smudge-free section of the glass.

“Huh,” Suzie said thoughtfully. Suddenly she thought of something and hurried back to the envelope to grab the photographs. She held one of the photographs up to the clean patch on the window.

“Looks like it could be the same angle,” Mary said thoughtfully.

“So, it was Harry who took these photos,” Suzie said with a shake of her head. “He must have taken them from here. What was he seeing that was so important to him?”

“Maybe it was just the emotions they were displaying,” Mary suggested. “Perhaps he thought of it as an interesting photographic opportunity.”

“Yes,” Suzie nodded a little. “That's possible. I can see that the first photo would capture an artist’s interest. I'm not sure what to think about the rest.”

“Well, I can tell you this much, the cleaner I have on hand is not going to get these windows clean. I think we need to go into town for some more heavy duty supplies,” she frowned.

“All right, we could use a break anyway,” Suzie shrugged. “Maybe we can get some coffee at the diner.”

“Anything to get my mind off Kent's phone calls,” Mary sighed as she followed her friend out the door.

“Has he been calling you again?” Suzie asked with surprise. It was the first her friend had mentioned it.

“Yes, he's insisting on knowing where I am, and what I'm doing, and when I'll be back. I just sent him a text to inform him that he

no longer needed to know those things once he filed for divorce," she rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Never again, Suzie. I know you tried to tell me the first time, but please, if you see me falling head over heels for someone just smack me."

"I promise," Suzie laughed as they drove towards the center of town. A part of Suzie felt a little saddened, however. Despite having many boyfriends over the years Suzie had never met a man who she was interested in spending more than a few weeks with. She couldn't comprehend the idea of inviting someone into her life on a permanent basis. She chalked it up to her being a private person, but sometimes she wondered if she was missing out on something. After seeing what Kent had put Mary through, it was hard for her to believe that any relationship was worth that kind of pain.

When they reached the hardware store to pick up some cleaning items and other supplies, Suzie did her best to put those thoughts out of her mind, and cheer her friend up instead.

"Look, Mary, a new hairstyle?" she suggested as she plopped a bright blue mop on the top of her head.

"Hmm, I like the color, the texture not so much," Mary laughed out loud. The owner of the hardware store eyed them warily from the counter.

"Watch out now," Suzie called out before firing a few sponges in Mary's direction.

"Suzie!" Mary huffed as she picked up the sponges. Instead of setting them back on the shelf however, she threw them right back. Soon the two were giggling and avoiding the disapproving glare of the store owner. It felt like they were kids again, finding any way possible to have fun. Suzie noticed that it chased away some of the sorrow from Mary's warm brown eyes. By the time they had all the supplies they needed the store owner was more than happy to see them go.

Mary and Suzie were still giggling to each other when they stepped out of the hardware store. Suzie was startled when she saw the same black sedan she had seen at the diner before, parked right behind her own car. A man was standing beside the car, dressed in a very nice suit, his wavy, gray hair swept back neatly. Jason, in full uniform, was standing in front of him on the sidewalk and they seemed to be talking very heatedly about something.

"Jason?" Suzie called out as she walked towards him. Mary took the bags that Suzie was carrying from her so that her hands would

be free.

“Not now,” Jason said darkly as he glanced over at her and then back at the man before him.

“Jason,” the man said in a disapproving paternal tone. “Don't be rude.”

Jason narrowed his eyes and glanced down at the sidewalk as if he wasn't sure what to do. Suzie didn't like the way the man was looking at her younger cousin, as if Jason had to answer to him.

“Hello, I'm Suzie, Jason's cousin,” Suzie explained quickly as she held out her hand to the man. She noticed a flicker of heat in his eyes before he extended his own hand and accepted hers with a polite handshake.

“Pleasure to meet you, Suzie,” he said quietly. “Sorry to keep Jason from you, but a mayor's job never ends,” he chuckled and released her hand. Suzie glanced over at Jason who was standing uncomfortably beside them both.

“Mayor?” she asked with surprise when she looked back at the man before her.

“I'm sorry, it was rude of me not to introduce myself,” he shook his head and smiled. “I'm Thomas Ralley, mayor of this fine town,” he added and winked at Suzie. Suzie smiled in response to his wink, but her eyes naturally narrowed with suspicion.

“I've been looking for an opportunity to introduce myself,” he added with a shy grin. “I just didn't know when would be the right time. You two ladies have been quite busy, I've heard,” he added as he looked over Suzie's shoulder at Mary who still had her arms full of the cleaning supplies they had just purchased.

“Quite,” Suzie agreed and felt her smile fade slightly. “I'm glad to have met you, Mr. Ralley,” she added.

“Oh please, call me Tom, everyone does,” he chuckled and glanced over at Jason. “Must be nice having family in town, Jason,” he said in a mild tone.

“Very,” Jason spoke shortly and then cleared his throat. “I've tried to convince her that the house is a total loss, but she's determined,” he raised an eyebrow as he looked directly at Suzie. Suzie felt the tension rise in the middle of the conversation though she could not place why it was there. Something about Thomas made her very uncomfortable, as if she'd met him before and had a reason not to like him.

“Well, we can't give up so easily on things just because they're a

little aged," she chuckled a little. "I suppose it's hard for someone as young as you to understand that Jason."

Jason pursed his lips and glanced away dismissively.

"Jason is one of our finest officers," Thomas offered to smooth out the feathers that seemed to have been ruffled. "Without him our police force would never run as well. He's pretty good at not giving up," he added and then lowered his voice with a playful tone. "I like to think he gets that from me."

"Oh?" Suzie asked with surprise as she looked between Jason and Thomas. "Do you know each other well?"

"He's a family friend," Jason said quickly and then laid a hand lightly on Mary's shoulder. "Let me help you with those," he offered as he took some bags from her.

"I would love to have dinner," Thomas suggested as Jason was steering Mary in the direction of the car. He paused and tossed a glance in the direction of the mayor.

"I'm sure they'll be tired..." Jason began to say, but Suzie interrupted him.

"I'd really enjoy that," Suzie said with a shrug, she wanted to know just how much influence this man had on her cousin. "Do you have a place in mind?"

"Cheney's has the best pasta in town," Thomas smiled as he glanced from Suzie to Mary who was getting into the car. Jason was still staring hard at Thomas. "Say about seven?" he suggested. "Jason, you should join us," he said, his voice gaining a sterner tone.

"Well, I..."

"Oh, that would be lovely," Suzie said with a broad smile. "We could use the break, and I feel like I haven't had the chance to learn anything about the town, or my cousin," she added as she looked over at Jason. Jason lowered his eyes and nodded reluctantly.

"See you then," Thomas smiled and turned to walk away from the car.

"Are you okay, Jason?" Suzie asked as she walked towards the driver's side door of the car.

"I'd be better if you had just taken my advice," he said rather shortly as he met her eyes across the top of the car.

"Is there something you want to tell me, Jason?" Suzie asked calmly. He held her gaze for a long moment as if he was considering it, but finally he looked away and closed the passenger

side door he had been holding open for Mary.

“See you at seven,” he sighed and strolled off down the sidewalk. Suzie watched him for a moment before sliding into the driver's seat. She looked over at Mary piled to her chin with bags and couldn't help but laugh.

“There is a trunk you know,” she grinned as she pulled the bags off her friend and tossed them onto the back seat.

“With that conversation, I wasn't going to say a word,” Mary said with a slow shake of her head. “You know, Suzie, when you first brought it up I thought you were being a little paranoid, but now that I've seen it with my own eyes, I think I agree with you.”

“Agree with me about what?” Suzie asked as she started the car.

“Something isn't right with Jason, and I'm certain it has something to do with that mayor,” she added through gritted teeth.

“I didn't get a good feeling about dear old Thomas either,” Suzie admitted and drove back towards the house.

“Well, obviously you would be suspicious of him,” Mary said with a shrug.

“What do you mean?” Suzie asked curiously.

“I mean the photograph,” Mary reminded her as she looked over at Suzie. “Didn't you recognize him?”

All of a sudden Suzie's eyes widened and she drew a sharp breath. The truth was she hadn't recognized him. But the moment that Mary mentioned the photograph, she knew exactly who her friend was talking about. There was no question in her mind that the man she had just met was the very same man in the photograph they had found in the safety deposit box.

“Oh my,” she whispered as they pulled into the long drive of the house. “I'm starting to think that my uncle really did get into the middle of something he shouldn't have.”

Once inside the house Suzie immediately pulled out the photographs again. Sure enough the man in the photo was identical to the mayor they had just met.

“If what Jason said was true and Thomas was an old family friend, then he and Harry must have known each other,” she tapped her chin slightly and shook her head. “None of this makes any sense at all to me.”

“It's a little confusing,” Mary agreed and pointed to the expression on the frightened woman's face. “I think it's time we found out who this person is. Was she his lover? Perhaps he was

having an affair and these photos were going to prove it?"

"Do you really think my uncle would be killed over a simple affair?" Suzie asked as she picked up the photo of the woman with a clear image of her face.

"We don't know that he was killed," Mary reminded her. "Maybe he was so stressed over discovering that his friend was cheating on his wife, that he really did have a sudden heart attack."

"Maybe," Suzie said softly as she recalled the firm grip of the mayor's handshake. "Thomas Ralley, TR," she shook her head and frowned. "I bet that cufflink really does belong to him."

"We have some time before dinner, maybe we should head into town and see if we can find out about the woman in the photograph?" Mary suggested as she glanced over the still messy living room. "It beats cleaning!"

"I guess you're right," Suzie nodded and then looked up at Mary. "But we should be careful who we talk to. If the mayor is as dangerous as I suspect he might be, then we don't want to make ourselves targets."

"He is dangerous," Jason said from the doorway of the house. It still startled Suzie to see him in his uniform considering her history with the police.

"Jason," she smiled at him as he stepped further inside. "We are looking forward to dinner tonight."

"Look, I don't know what the two of you think you're doing," Jason said in a cool tone that did not even pretend to be polite. "But if it involves the mayor, you need to stop. He wants this property, and if I had inherited it, I would have handed it right over to him. He is only taking you to dinner to convince you to sell the property to him," he paused a moment and looked directly into Suzie's eyes. "He is used to getting what he wants."

"Jason, did your father know Thomas well?" Suzie asked, ignoring his warning.

"Actually my mother, Beverly, knew his wife, Samantha, well," Jason reluctantly admitted. "My father and Thomas never really got along. My father was always busy," he added and narrowed his eyes. "Too busy to be there for my mother, or me. Thomas is the one that taught me to play ball, to ride a bike," he frowned and rubbed the back of his neck. "He's not the easiest man, but at least he cares."

Suzie had to bite her lip to keep from revealing the letter she

had found. “Was your father always interested in photography?” she asked as she picked up the photo of the sunrise to show him. Jason barely looked at it.

“After my mother died he started taking photographs,” Jason shrugged. “It was like he needed something to distract him from the truth.”

“That she was gone?” Suzie coaxed him, trying to salvage a little more information from him.

“That he wasn't there when she needed him,” Jason corrected sternly. “Before she died he was obsessed with this house. He wanted it to be perfect, wanted to restore it to its historical state. Of course Thomas wanted the town to move on, to get more progressive so he and my father were always arguing over it,” he glanced at his watch briefly. “I should go, I am covering someone's shift for the afternoon.”

“Jason wait, stay for a little longer,” Suzie suggested.

“How about a beer?” Mary offered. “There's still some in the fridge that your father must have left.”

“Beer?” he raised an eyebrow. “My father didn't drink,” he said firmly. “If he did, it wasn't beer.”

“Oh, well I guess someone else must have left it,” Mary said with a frown.

“I need to get back to work,” Jason said firmly. “I only came here, because I thought it best to warn you. Thomas has influence all over this town, so if you try to restore this place you're going to be in for a real battle. I wasn't going to say anything about it, but I just didn't think it was fair to let the two of you work so hard, when he'll likely find a legal loophole to sweep it out from under you.”

“Thank you for the warning, Jason,” Suzie said in a warmer tone. She didn't want to alienate him, but she could tell that he was troubled by going against what Thomas wanted. She could also see a little bit of fear in his expression when he spoke of Thomas. She wondered if he had some kind of influence over Jason as a police officer, as well.

“So, I should cancel dinner?” Jason asked hopefully.

“Oh no, we'll be there,” Suzie smiled sweetly. “Wouldn't miss it.”

Jason rolled his eyes as his shoulders drooped. He opened his mouth as if he might have something more to say, then he just shook his head and walked back out of the house.

“He's awfully grumpy,” Mary muttered as she watched the door

slam behind him.

“I think it's time we unravelled just what kind of power Thomas has over Jason,” Suzie said as she placed her hands on her hips. “Enough is enough, it's time to put all of this to rest. Let's head to the library, we're going to find out who that woman is in the photograph, and why the photographs are important, oh and,” she snatched up the cufflink from the table, “this is coming to dinner with us tonight.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

Once they got to town again it was late afternoon and many of the small shops and businesses in the town were already preparing to close. Luckily, the library was still open. When they stepped in they noticed a man with stark white hair standing behind the reception desk. He wore a pair of glasses with thick lenses and was leafing through a large reference book.

“Excuse me, sir,” Suzie said as she walked up to the desk.

“Yes,” he asked as he peered at her over the rim of his glasses.

“I was wondering if you could help me with something,” she said as she laid the photo of the woman on the desk in front of him. “I'm visiting from out of town, and I found this photo.”

“Oh, I know all about you,” he smiled, and when he did the stodgy demeanor that he first gave off faded into something much more mischievous. “Suzie Allen, niece of Harry and Beverly Allen, cousin to our beloved Jason Allen,” he smiled a little as he glanced over at Mary who was standing a few steps behind her. “And Mary Brent, you, I don't know as much about, my darling, but I am glad to meet you,” he offered her a charming smile and a wink.

Mary managed a smile and a nod, but Suzie noticed the warmth of her expression did not warm her eyes. When she looked back at the man before her he was still smiling.

“I'm Louis,” he explained as he closed the book he had been reading. “Don't worry, I'm not a stalker, I just make it my business to know everything I can about this town, and that includes long lost relatives.”

“Well, then I think I am talking to the right person,” Suzie smiled and pushed the photo closer to him. He glanced down at the photo, then looked back up at her with an arched eyebrow.

“You must be from out of town,” he said, his voice lowering.

“Put that photograph away before you get me fired.”

“What? Why?” Suzie asked and glanced over at Mary who seemed just as confused. She tucked the photo back into her purse.

“Why? Because that's a photograph of Samantha, the Mayor Ralley's wife,” he lowered his voice even further so that Suzie had to lean in closer to hear what he was saying. “She ran off about three weeks ago. No one knows why. The rumor is that she was upset with his less than legal behaviors, and she demanded a divorce.”

“Oh,” Suzie said as her heart fluttered in her chest. “And no one knows where she is?”

“No one has heard from her. She's got a sister two towns over, hasn't heard a word. She tried to get the police to look into it, but since Mayor Ralley is, well you know, mayor, they dismissed it as a marital dispute and decided not to look into it,” he frowned as he glanced around the library to make sure no one else was listening in. “Last person I know for sure who saw her was Jason. He came in here upset after talking to her, asked me if I knew about some of the different members of the police force taking bribes from Ralley. I told him no of course, because Jason, as good of a kid as he's always been, has no clue what kind of man Ralley is, and I didn't trust that Jason wouldn't turn around and tell Ralley what I said.”

“And you're not worried about us doing the same?” Mary asked as she rested one elbow on the desk.

“No,” he replied with a chuckle and shook his head. “No one would believe it coming from outsiders, but if Jason said it, well Jason is known to be one of the most honest people left in this town. He's a good man, a good police officer, just a little clueless when it comes to Ralley. Can't really blame him though, Ralley's been trying to take that boy's father's place ever since he found out Samantha couldn't have kids.”

“Wow, you really do know about everything in this town,” Suzie replied with amazement. “Is there anything you don't know?” she asked.

“I don't know how a man as healthy as Harry drops dead of a heart attack,” Louis replied with a darkened gaze. Suzie was a little startled by his words. “Now, if you don't mind, I need to close up.”

“Sure, thank you for your help,” Suzie said quickly as she could tell that he was worried he had said more than he should have. She wanted to use one of the library computers to see what was on the

flash drive but she didn’t want to delay him.

“Just don't mention it, I mean that,” he said sternly and waved them towards the door.

As soon as they were outside on the sidewalk Mary turned and grabbed Suzie by the elbow.

“You do know what this means?” she asked as she locked eyes with Suzie.

“Tell me what you think,” Suzie encouraged her.

“If Samantha saw Jason before she disappeared and she told Jason her suspicions about Mayor Ralley maybe she also told him she was planning to leave her husband. If that's the case, then Jason probably felt terribly guilty about being with her shortly before she disappeared,” she pointed out with a frown. “I bet that's why he's being very loyal to Ralley. If he's as manipulative as everyone says, he's probably got Jason completely on his side.”

“Maybe,” Suzie nodded as she gazed down the sidewalk at the people who were heading home for the day. “But I think Jason suspects something. I'm sure he doesn't suspect that his father might not have died of natural causes, however,” she tightened her jaw.

“Do you really think that Mayor Ralley killed him?” Mary asked as she studied Suzie's expression.

“I think it's time we find out if my uncle's death was as natural as everyone seems to think,” she said with determination.

“How are we going to do that?” Mary asked.

Suzie glanced at her watch. “We still have two hours before we're supposed to meet with Jason and Mayor Ralley for dinner. That should be enough time to get some information from the coroner.”

“Oh Suzie, are you sure?” Mary asked as she touched her arm gently. “It won't upset you too much.”

“The only way it will upset me is if I never look into it,” Suzie replied with certainty. She glanced up at the fading light in the afternoon sky. “Uncle Harry trusted me with this mystery, I don't know why. Maybe he kept track of me. Maybe he knew that I had a career as an investigative journalist and he hoped that I would look deeper into things. Maybe he just wanted to protect Jason from discovering the truth. Whatever the real reason, he left this responsibility in my hands, and I intend to get to the bottom of this.”

“Let's get over there then,” Mary said with her shoulders

squared. “Mayor or not, Ralley has no idea what he's up against when the two of us are working together.”

When they reached the police station, Mary's cell phone began to ring. She glanced down at it and frowned. She sent the call to voicemail. Then the phone began to ring again.

“Ugh, I guess I better take this,” Mary huffed, knowing that it was her soon to be ex-husband, Kent.

“It's fine, you wait here, that way if they cuff me you can make bail,” Suzie chuckled and put the car in park. Mary was arguing on the phone with Kent when Suzie closed the door behind her. She couldn't wait for her friend to truly be free of him, but she knew that Mary had to handle it in her own way.

When she walked into the police station, Suzie felt a surge of anxiety. It had been so many years, and yet the presence of so many uniformed officers and the subtle clang of metal doors reminded her of just how it felt to have her freedom taken from her, even if for only one night. It had been hard to believe that she would ever walk out of that cell, and that had driven the point home well enough for her to avoid investigating anything so serious again. However, here she was again, about to lie through her teeth to the man at the front desk.

“Hello,” Suzie smiled at him as she walked up to him.

“Hello,” he replied and swept his gaze over her with curiosity. He was nearly bald with a short, stubby beard that spread awkwardly along his full drooping cheeks and rounded chin. “How can I help you?” he asked.

“My cousin, Jason Allen, is an officer here,” she explained. “My uncle, Harry Allen recently passed, and I was hoping to speak to the coroner.”

“Why would you need to speak to the coroner?” he asked as his pale green eyes settled on her.

“Honestly, I just have a few personal health issues and I'd like to know if he had any of these issues at the time of his passing,” she explained. “It would only take a few minutes.”

“I'll see if she's free,” he agreed and picked up the phone on the desk. Suzie smiled with relief. She had expected to have to lie more than that, but apparently Jason's reputation was as stellar as Louis at the library had described it.

“Sure, uh huh,” the desk sergeant muttered into the phone. “All right then I'll send her down,” he said, then hung up the phone.

When he looked back up at Suzie his expression hadn't changed. “Just take that elevator there,” he pointed to the elevator at the end of the lobby. “Hit B for Basement,” he explained. “Then go down the hall and it's the third door on the right,” he lowered his voice as he added. “Make sure you go right, the doors on the left, you don't want to see what's in there,” he assured her.

Suzie cringed a little at the idea of what the doors on the left might be hiding. She assumed they might contain bodies. She didn't think a small town like Garber had too many murders to be concerned about, but then she wouldn't have anticipated a crooked mayor either. As she rode down on the elevator she felt her anxiety rising. She wondered if she would be able to convince the coroner to tell her the truth about her uncle's death. Was it possible that she had been bought and paid for by Mayor Ralley as well?

When she stepped off the elevator she found a dimly lit and completely empty hallway. The doors weren't even marked. There was nothing in the hallway to indicate where she should go and where she shouldn't. She counted the doors and made sure that she went to the right. When she opened the door she was greeted by a stark, medicinal scent that made her stomach churn slightly. A woman was standing over a microscope, her dark blonde hair swept up into a half-bun at the back of her head, the rest flowing down over her shoulders to reach her mid-back. When she turned to see who had stepped inside, Suzie was surprised to see how young she looked. Maybe even younger than Jason. She had soft features, and soothing hazel eyes that seemed to set Suzie at ease.

“Hello, I'm Suzie Allen,” she said as she stepped further into the room.

“Ah yes, Ms. Allen, sorry,” she pulled the gloves she was wearing off her hands and disposed of them in the bio-hazard container that was closest to her. “I'm Dr. Rose, I'm actually really glad to have the chance to speak with you.”

“Really?” Suzie asked. “Why is that?”

“Well, we get a lot of heart attacks around here,” she explained and then hesitated. “I hope that I didn't offend you.”

“Not at all,” Suzie said gently. “I didn't know my uncle very well.”

“Well, like I've said I've seen quite a few heart attacks. This particular heart attack is a very rare one. I've never seen one myself before. The heart itself was in perfect condition prior to the attack.”

“That's strange,” Suzie said as she narrowed her eyes.

“Very strange,” Dr. Rose agreed with a nod. “Especially since these types of heart attacks are only seen in two types of people. Extreme athletes, and drug users.”

“Oh,” Suzie cringed as she shook her head. “I don't think my uncle was a drug user.”

“I don't think so either,” Dr. Rose admitted. “His liver was in good health, habitual drug use or drinking would have caused damage to his liver. I believe he might have taken a very high dose of something, however I couldn't find anything in his blood.”

“Is that why you ruled his death to be of natural causes?” Suzie pried carefully.

“Yes, unfortunately, I can't prove otherwise,” she paused a moment and looked into Suzie's eyes. “I can't prove it, but I do suspect otherwise. That's why I was glad to see you. I've tried to get information from Jason about his family's health history but getting two words out of that man is exhausting.”

“I know what you mean,” Suzie chuckled. “Well, my father did die when I was young, but it was from cancer, not a heart attack.”

“Hmm, and you?” Dr. Rose asked as she pulled out a folder with what Suzie could only assume was her uncle's medical information in it. “Have you had any problems with your heart?”

“No,” Suzie shook her head slowly. “I've always been in good health, actually.”

Dr. Rose made a few notes on the paperwork. In the silence, Suzie found herself wondering how someone could cause a heart attack in someone else.

“Is it possible that someone poisoned him, Dr. Rose?” she asked.

“It's possible,” Dr. Rose replied hesitantly. “Like I said, I didn't find anything unusual in his system, but since it had been three days by the time we found him,” her voice trailed off.

“Oh my, I didn't know about that,” Suzie said with a deep frown. It was unsettling to think of her uncle being alone in that house for so long. But it made sense to her considering how reclusive her uncle had become. Jason had to feel terrible that he hadn't realized that his father was gone. He had the same experience after his mother passed.

“Yes,” Dr. Rose said sadly. “Unfortunately, some of the things I could test for might have degraded in his system so much by the time that he was found, that they might not be detected.”

“So, you're saying there's no way to medically prove if he was killed deliberately,” Suzie said with surprise in her voice. “But everyone around town seems to think that he died of natural causes.”

“Well,” Dr. Rose closed the file and set it down on the desk beside the microscope she had been looking through. “You'll find in Garber that things work a little differently, Ms. Allen,” she said with a hint of bitterness in her voice. “I've had to be careful not to express my opinions too loudly. But like I said, there is no proof, and so I could technically only rule his death as due to natural causes.”

“Well, I appreciate your time and your candor,” Suzie said as her heart skipped a beat. She knew now that she was not the only one who suspected her uncle's death had not been due to natural causes. “If you find anything, can you let me know?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” Dr. Rose agreed. Then she smiled a little. “It's good to know that Jason still has family.”

Suzie smiled in return. “It's been a pleasure to get to know him.”

As she rode the elevator back up to the lobby of the police station, she just hoped that Jason wasn't going to end up despising her for digging so deeply into something that was a mystery to her, and a tragedy to him.

When she stepped out onto the sidewalk she found Mary waiting for her.

“I'm so sorry about that, Suzie. Kent was upset about some paper that didn't get signed,” she shrugged and rolled her eyes. “There wasn't much I could do about it from here.”

“It's okay,” Suzie replied, still a little dazed from what Dr. Rose had revealed. “It looks like uncle Harry might have been poisoned,” she said quietly.

“Poisoned?” Mary gasped.

“Shh!” Suzie grabbed her arm and steered her towards the car. “We can't let word get around that we suspect anything. At least not until I have a chance to get to know Mayor Ralley over dinner,” she smirked a little before sliding into the driver's seat.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

When Suzie and Mary arrived at the restaurant it was fairly busy. It appeared that most of the dinner crowd were at the tail end of their meal.

“We're waiting for two more,” Suzie said as the hostess offered to seat them.

“Oh, they're already here,” the young woman said quickly. “The mayor reserved his table for you,” she added with a dreamy smile. Suzie and Mary exchanged glances before they were led through the restaurant. It was certainly not a five star restaurant, but you wouldn't know it from the people who were dining there. Everyone was dressed in their finest, including Jason and the mayor, both of whom stood up when the two women approached.

“Welcome,” Thomas said and pulled out Suzie's chair for her. Jason did not miss a beat to do the same for Mary. Suzie tried not to be impressed by their manners, but it was hard not to be. When she sat down across from the two men, she found herself entertaining a terrible thought. If everyone was in Thomas' pocket as so many had said, then was Jason in his pocket, too? Was it possible that her cousin had something to do with his father's passing?

“What would you like to have to drink, ladies?” Thomas asked as he handed them each a menu. “Jason and I have already ordered ours,” he added.

“I think I'll have a glass of wine,” Mary said with a smile as the waitress approached.

“They have a delicious chardonnay here,” Thomas suggested with a flash of his impossibly white teeth.

“Let's make it two,” Suzie suggested and sat back as the waitress placed drinks on the table for Thomas and Jason.

Suzie had to bite into her bottom lip to keep from gasping when she saw the label on the beer that was placed down in front of Thomas.

“Your favorite, Mr. Mayor,” the waitress smiled.

“Thank you so much, I have been looking forward to one of these all day,” he sighed as he turned the dark, glass bottle between his palms. “Nothing like a reward after some hard work. I guess you both know all about that,” he chuckled as he looked up at Mary and Suzie.

Suzie forced herself to look away from the bottle of beer. It was the same brand as the six pack that had been in Harry's refrigerator. The same beer that Jason had insisted his father would never drink. Now that she saw it in the mayor's hand things began to make sense to her. Perhaps the mayor had dropped by Dune House for a visit and had brought a six pack of his favorite beer. Maybe he insisted on Harry taking a few swigs with him. Harry, as fearful as he was of the man, probably would have complied. Could the poison have been in the beer?

But Suzie knew she was getting ahead of herself. She still had no idea why Thomas would want to kill Harry over a few photos. It was time to test the waters.

“Actually, we did have a harrowing incident the other day with the plumbing,” Suzie began to describe finding something wedged in the drain of the sink. “Turns out, it was this,” Suzie said as she fished the cufflink out of her purse and laid it on the table. Jason stared down at it, and then looked slowly up at her. Thomas barely skimmed his gaze over it.

“Oh, how strange,” he shrugged and sipped his beer.

“Stranger still,” Suzie said as she nudged the cufflink towards him. “It has your initials on it.”

“Does it?” Thomas laughed. “I'm sure there are plenty of people with the initials TR.”

“So, it's not yours?” Suzie asked and raised an eyebrow.

“Uh, well,” Thomas picked up the cufflink and took a closer look at it. “Now that you mention it, this does look like a cufflink I've worn before. I must have lost it in Dune House years ago.”

“Years ago?” Suzie asked and tilted her head slightly to the side. “So, you wouldn't have been wearing it recently?”

“I'm sorry, is there something unfashionable about cufflinks these days?” Thomas asked with a chuckle low in his throat. “I

didn't realize that it was such an issue whether I wore them or not."

"Oh no, not at all," Suzie said quickly and flashed him an even, cool smile. "I just thought I'd search for the other one for you, if you'd lost them recently."

"Nope, it's been years," Thomas repeated with certainty. "I'm sure you wouldn't be able to find the other one even if you tried. I spent a lot of time at Dune House when Jason was a boy, didn't I, son?" he asked as he looked over at Jason.

"Yes, you did," Jason replied though his gaze was lingering on the cufflink. "Our families were close," Jason explained to Mary and Suzie. "My mother and Samantha were best friends," he added in a softer tone. "I still can't understand why Samantha ran off."

"Oh well, that's not dinner talk, Jason," Thomas said sharply. "We don't need to air our family business."

"I am family, too," Suzie spoke up with determination. "And I'd love to hear anything that Jason has to share."

"Sometimes I think about her," Jason admitted as he toyed with the cufflink. "I wonder where she's gone and what life she's living now. Don't you, Thomas?" he asked as he looked over at the man beside him.

"Jason, it's only been a few weeks. She'll run it out of her system, and I'm sure she'll be back in no time," Thomas sighed as if he carried the burdens of every person who roamed the earth. "Sometimes being married to a free spirit is hard."

"You poor thing," Mary replied with just enough edge to her words that Suzie could tell she meant it sarcastically. Luckily, before Jason or Thomas could pick up on it the waitress was back with their wines.

"I understand that you're part of the family, Suzie," Thomas said after the waitress walked away. "But this isn't just about the Allens. Garber is its own special kind of family. We all know each other, and have known each other for decades. We trust each other. Surely you can appreciate that," he smiled.

"I suppose," Suzie nodded and cast a smile in Mary's direction. "Mary is more like my sister than my friend, so I can understand that family is not just limited to blood."

"Exactly," Thomas smiled. "That's why I was surprised when Jason didn't inherit Dune House. I had hoped that you would be interested in following his wishes, since truly you should have no claim to the property."

“Well, from what I understand your only interest in the property is to flatten it,” Suzie reminded Thomas and glanced over at Jason. “Isn't that right, Jason?” she asked. Jason nodded as if he was coming out of a daze.

“It's what's best for everyone,” he insisted.

“Don't you have any fond memories of your home, Jason?” Suzie asked in a softer tone.

“Surely there are some experiences you treasure,” Mary prompted him as well.

“Sometimes the darker memories outweigh even the most precious memories,” Thomas interrupted in an attempt to change the subject. “Are you ladies ready to order?”

Jason was still staring wistfully at the cufflink.

“Actually, I am a little more tired than I expected,” Suzie said as she picked up the cufflink. “How about you, Mary?” she asked as she looked over at her friend.

“Me, too,” Mary agreed. “Didn't know how tired I was until I sat down.”

“I think we're going to call it a night,” Suzie said with a slow smile as she looked back at Thomas. “But you two, enjoy your meal,” she added as she stood up from the table. “And as for Dune House, my uncle left it to me, because he trusted me to value it and protect it. Obviously that trust you spoke of doesn't run through every home in Garber,” she turned on her heel and walked away from the table with Mary right behind her. They had almost made it to the car when Jason caught up with them.

“What was all that about?” he asked sharply.

“Sorry, Jason, but I don't like that man,” Suzie said as she turned to face him. “I don't trust him.”

Jason frowned as he met her eyes, and then nodded a little. “Do you still have that cufflink?”

“Sure,” Suzie opened her hand to reveal it.

“He said he lost it years ago, but I gave these to him,” Jason said grimly. “I bought them for him right after my mother died, because he was so there for me. But I know for certain that I saw him wearing them about a month ago.”

“Jason, we know for certain that he was wearing those cufflinks about three weeks ago,” Suzie said and reached into the envelope in her purse. She pulled out the photographs from inside of it. “These are what your father left in the safety deposit box, Jason. I'm afraid

that something might have happened to Samantha."

Jason's eyes widened as he sorted through the photos. "Are there more?" he asked in a grave tone.

"Not printed," Suzie replied. "I have this flash drive that I haven't looked into yet," she showed him the small drive. "Maybe there are more on here."

"Let me have it," Jason said, and extended his hand. Suzie looked at him with uncertainty. She was sure that the flash drive might have further proof of what really happened to Samantha, and in turn what might have really happened to her uncle. If she gave the flash drive to Jason there was a good chance that he would give it to Thomas.

"It's okay, Suzie," Mary said from beside her. "You can trust him."

Jason looked over at Mary with surprise, and then back to Suzie. "You can," he promised her. "I'll look at it at the police station."

"Call me the minute you find anything," Suzie requested as she pressed the flash drive into the palm of Jason's hand. "And please be careful, Jason. I know that you value Thomas' friendship, but if what I suspect about him is true, he's never been a friend to you."

"I will be," Jason promised her as he tucked the flash drive into his pocket. When he walked back towards the restaurant Suzie wondered if she had made a terrible mistake.

"How did you know that I could trust him?" she asked Mary as they walked to the car.

"It's in his eyes," Mary explained and smiled faintly. "I always knew when my kids were lying. They would get a little shine in their eyes. There wasn't any shine in his, just hurt. He needs to know the truth about Thomas, and about his father. If that flash drive helps him to find it, then no matter what comes of all of this, we will have had a good reason to be here."

Suzie nodded and unlocked the car doors. The entire drive home however, she couldn't stop thinking about that beer that had been left in the fridge.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

Early the next morning when Suzie woke up she found Mary was already awake and making coffee.

“Mary, they didn't haul off all of that garbage yet, did they?” Suzie asked.

“No, it's still in a pile on the side of the house,” Mary replied as she fixed their coffee. “Why?” when she turned around with the two mugs of coffee she found that Suzie was gone. Suzie was digging through the garbage bags. She could recall carefully placing the glass bottles she had found in the living room into the trash bags to make sure they didn't break. She found them fairly easily.

“What are you doing?” Mary asked with growing concern.

“This is what I think happened, Mary,” Suzie explained as she held up the beer bottles. “I think that Harry saw Thomas and Samantha walk down to the water. I think he took photos of what he thought was going to be a romantic evening. I think he took photos of them arguing, and then much more than that. I think Thomas killed Samantha because she threatened to leave him and expose him, and I think Harry saw it all,” she frowned as she carried the bottles back into the house.

“I think that when Harry took the photographs to be printed as proof, the clerk in the store spotted what was on the photographs and alerted Thomas, that's why all of the photos weren't printed. Before Harry had a chance to print them again, Thomas stopped by with some beer. At this point, after witnessing such a horrific crime, I think Harry was terrified of the man. So, when Thomas insisted on him drinking one of the beers, he probably did. He had no idea that the beer was poisoned. That's why Thomas was so bent on having this place bulldozed. He wanted to make sure that any evidence was turned into rubble,” she shook her head as she wrapped the bottles

in plastic bags. “But I bet Dr. Rose can pull something out of these bottles that will show just what poison was used.”

“You should take them to the station,” Mary insisted. “I would go with you, but I have to wait for Kent to fax me some paperwork. I managed to hook up the computer and the internet so I could receive it and print it. If I don't get it back to him today this is going to drag on forever.”

“It's fine, it's better if you stay here where it's safe,” Suzie said sternly. “Don't leave the house unless you text me. Until we get all of this figured out we could be at risk.”

“I'll be careful,” Mary promised. “You be careful, too.”

“I will be,” Suzie hugged her friend tightly then hurried to the car. She wanted to get to the station and find out if Jason had found anything on the flash drive.

When Suzie walked into the station she found Jason leaning over a man's shoulder at a computer.

“Hi Suzie,” Jason said as he straightened up. “Sorry, but we didn't find anything yet. Looks like the drive was wiped clean somehow. What's that you have there?” he asked curiously as he looked at the plastic bags.

“Just something for Dr. Rose,” Suzie explained.

“She's out for the moment, she'll be in by ten though. This is Carter, our IT tech,” he added as he patted the man's shoulder. Carter was too busy staring at the screen to greet her.

“Oh yes,” Carter muttered as he scrolled through the computer screen. “I found it,” he snapped his fingers and laughed shortly.

“Found what?” Suzie asked as she leaned over his shoulder.

Jason rested his hands on the desk on the other side of Carter and leaned in closely as well. “What is it?” he asked in a more gruff tone.

“Well, you see people think when they delete things, that they just disappear, but that's not the case. A copy of whatever they have deleted usually remains, as is the case here,” he added as he clicked the mouse. When he did, photographs began to populate the screen.

“Oh no,” Suzie gasped as she saw the images before her. “Thomas was with his wife that night on the beach, but not for a romantic evening,” she shook her head. The images revealed that Thomas had actually struck his wife very hard over the head with the bottle of wine he had been carrying. Then he let her body be washed away by the sea. Suzie thought of her uncle taking those photos. “Uncle Harry must have been horrified,” she murmured.

“He knew there wasn't time,” Jason said quietly as he stared at the screen. “He knew there wasn't time to get down there to help her, so he made sure he had evidence instead. All this time,” he growled as he stood up straight. “I trusted that man more than my own father!”

“Jason, it's not your fault he fooled you,” Suzie tried to calm him as she met his eyes. “You were hurting, and you needed someone, there's no shame in that.”

“There is if the man I turned to is also my father's murderer,” Jason countered as he snatched up his hat and began walking towards the front of the police station.

“Jason, where are you going?” Suzie called out with concern.

“I'm going to arrest the mayor,” he replied sharply. Suzie ran to catch up with him and made it to his side just in time as he reached his patrol car.

“Jason wait, don't you think it would be better to send someone else?” Suzie pleaded. “What if he knows that you know?”

“I'll be fine, Suzie,” he assured her and started the engine of the car. “I wouldn't let anyone else put the handcuffs on that man.”

As Suzie watched Jason drive away she felt a subtle sense of relief despite the chaos of the last few minutes. She was glad that Jason finally knew that his father had been trying to be a better man than he had been in the past. He had stuck his neck out in an attempt to right a wrong, unfortunately he had suffered for his attempt. She only hoped that Jason wouldn't put himself in a similar position. Suzie was still thinking about this when she pulled into the driveway at Dune House. She walked up onto the porch and called out as she walked in the door.

“Mary, I'm here, sorry it took me longer than I expected...” she

was suddenly silenced by the presence of Thomas standing beside the fireplace. Her purse slipped off her arm and fell to the floor.

“So glad you could join us, Suzie,” he said and gestured to the chair across from the fireplace. Suzie noticed Mary sitting in the opposite chair, her eyes wide, and her lips drawn tight with fear.

“What are you doing here?” Suzie asked with growing animosity.

“Oh, can't I just drop by for a visit?” Thomas asked with a shrug. “I just wanted to see the progress you two have made. I must say it's pretty amazing. It's a shame no one else is going to see it,” he added as he used the poker he held in his hand to stir the ashes in the fireplace.

“What are you talking about?” Suzie demanded. She hoped he didn't know what they had discovered.

“You know, I thought to myself, these two ladies they're not going to find anything. They'll lose interest and move on. So, imagine my surprise when I discovered that you had been doing a little investigating, Suzie?” he laughed a little and shook his head. “The thing about small towns, is that you can't keep secrets. Especially from the mayor. I own just about every person in this town, and I will do anything it takes to make sure that my secrets are kept. Yours however, are public knowledge,” he stirred the ashes again. “Sit down, Suzie.”

“I'll stand,” Suzie replied and stood beside Mary's chair. “I want to know what all this is about.”

“I know you went to the bank, I know that you took those photos to the library, I know that you had Carter analyzing something at the police station. I know,” he said in a cruel tone as he stepped closer to her, “that Jason is on his way to arrest me. Can you imagine that? Me? I've been nothing but caring to that boy, and this is how he repays me.”

“I wouldn't call killing his father caring,” Suzie replied through gritted teeth. She held his gaze steadily. She was determined not to let him see how terrified she was.

“Try proving it,” Thomas suggested with a chuckle. “Good ol' Harry died of a broken heart. Isn't that poetic enough for you?” he asked. “The old man could have passed away in here and rotted for years without anyone noticing, least of all his son. So really, was it so tragic for me to take a life that was being wasted?”

“You're a terrible person,” Suzie said flatly as she crossed her

arms. “You're so smug, thinking that you got away with two murders. But you haven't got away with anything.”

“Two?” Thomas narrowed his eyes sharply and took a step closer to her. “By the time I'm done here, honey, it's going to be four.”

With that he picked up some rope that was laying in a pile behind him.

“Mary, come on, we have to get out of here,” Suzie said in a hiss and reached for her friend's hand. Only then did she realize that Mary was tied to the chair by her ankles.

“What are you doing?” she asked with horror as she turned back to Thomas to find he was trailing gasoline in a circle around the two chairs. When he put the gas can down, he pulled out a gun he had tucked in the back of his pants. Suzie's heart was racing. He pointed the gun at Mary.

“Get in the chair, or I do this now,” he said sharply. Suzie knew that the moment she was tied up in the chair there would be no hope of either of them escaping, but she couldn't leave Mary alone.

“Don't do this, Thomas, think of your career,” Suzie spoke quickly. “Think of spending your life behind bars!”

“I don't need to think about either,” he barked back. “I did what I had to do. Samantha was going to leave me. She was going to tell the world about my illegal dealings. How would it make me look to have my own wife saying these things about me? What do you think that would do to a wholesome image like mine? If your uncle had just stayed out of it, then none of this would have happened,” he pointed out. “But he didn’t, so now, it has to happen. Sit down,” he commanded her sternly.

Suzie reluctantly sat down in the high backed chair. She grabbed onto Mary's hand as Thomas wrapped the rope around their wrists and around Suzie's ankles.

“Look on the bright side, ladies, at least you won't be going alone. And, in the future this will be the sight of a resort,” he smiled up at them. Suzie was startled by how ruthless he was. She knew no amount of pleading would stop him. She tried to think of a way to escape, but with her heart racing and her mind spinning, she couldn't think of a single thing.

“Please, we won't say anything to anyone,” Mary promised as she squeezed Suzie's hand.

“If only I could believe that,” he sighed and pulled a pack of

matches out of his pocket.

“Stop!” Jason shouted from the door that Suzie had left open. He had his gun drawn and was aiming it straight at Thomas. “Drop the matches,” Jason demanded.

“Sure, just let me light them first,” Thomas chuckled and began fumbling with them.

“Don't do it, I will shoot you,” Jason warned him as he stepped closer.

“You're not going to shoot me, Jason,” Thomas rolled his eyes. “Are you forgetting that I've seen you bawl your eyes out over your poor father? I know you, kid, you're not going to shoot...”

The sound of the gun being fired was so deafening that at first Suzie thought it was an explosion. She looked up in horror, expecting to see Thomas slumped over on the floor. Instead she saw him cowering close to the fireplace. He had dropped the matches. The bullet Jason fired was lodged into the wall just above where Thomas' shoulder had been.

“You're under arrest,” Jason declared as he moved closer to him.

Outside Dune House sirens and tires squealed as patrol cars arrived to back up Jason. Other officers rushed in to handcuff Thomas, but Jason stopped them.

“I want to do it,” he said firmly. Once the mayor was in custody and had been taken out of the house, Jason walked over to Suzie and Mary who had stepped outside onto the porch.

“How did you know that he'd be here?” Suzie asked as she and Mary gulped down the fresh air that came from the sea. Having been so close to being killed was enough reason to savor every breath.

“I was driving over there, when I remembered that Thomas paid for all three of the desk sergeant's kids to go through college. It seemed generous at the time, but the more I thought about it, and what we'd learned about Thomas, the more I wondered if it was a way to get information out of the police station. Then I thought about what Thomas would do if he knew that you two had found those photographs. Of course, after finding out about him killing his wife I knew what he was capable of, so I thought it best that I come back and check on you,” he sighed and shook his head. “I'm so glad I did.”

“So are we,” Mary laughed, her hands still shaking with fear. “When he burst in, I didn't know what to think. I just pretended I

didn't know anything. I didn't know what else to do. Then he pulled the gun on me, and," she sighed. "I've never been so afraid."

"I'm sorry, Mary," Suzie hugged her tightly. "I had no idea it would turn out like this. I need to get you home."

"Home?" Mary asked with a faint smile. "I don't have a home to go back to, remember? Yes, I was scared, but Suzie you were there, and then Jason came. It was actually rather thrilling," she admitted in a sheepish tone.

"Do you think he has any chance of going free?" Suzie asked as she looked back at Jason.

"Not with the photos we have, and what Dr. Rose will likely find in those beer bottles, and now this," he added as he frowned in the direction of the ropes hanging off the chairs. "Thomas has always had a strong influence on the people of this town, but never once did I think he was a criminal. I guess I trusted him too easily," he blinked a few times then wiped at his eyes. "I need to get back to the station, are you two okay or would you like to be checked out at the hospital?"

"We're fine," Mary said quickly.

"Yes, thanks to you," Suzie added. "But wait just a moment, Jason," she requested as she walked over to her purse which she had dropped on the floor. She pulled out the envelope that she had found in some of Harry's things. "I think it's time you read this," she said softly and pressed it into his hand. He stared at her with a puzzled look. "Give your father a chance, Jason, grief can cause people to behave in the strangest ways. I might not have known your father well, but since I've been here I've learned a thing or two about him. I've learned that he was willing to risk his own life to reveal the truth, and I've learned that he loved you more than he was ever brave enough to say."

"I'll read it," Jason promised with a slow nod. As he walked out through the door of Dune House, Suzie felt a strange sense of relief. She almost felt as if her Uncle Harry was walking out right along with him.

By the time the stars rose that evening, Suzie was exhausted again. But it was a nice feeling. She and Mary had straightened out the living room after forensics had done a sweep of it. They left behind more dust of course. There was still a lot to do to get the B & B ready to open, but together Suzie had no doubt that they could do it.

Suzie had invited Jason over to join them for a glass of wine on the porch after such a long and adrenaline-filled day. She wasn't sure if he would take her up on it, but she hoped he would. When she settled down on the chair beside Mary she felt at peace for the first time in a long time. With her best friend beside her, and the ocean stretched out before her, she felt as if there were no longer any limitations to the possibilities in her life. Stranger still, when she watched the rolling waves, she thought of Paul for the first time since he had caught her mid-fall at the motel. She wondered whether he was still on solid ground, or if he was back out on the waves.

“Last week I never would have thought of us being here,” Mary chuckled to herself as she too looked out over the water. “It's amazing the turns life takes.”

When they heard the squeak of the door to the porch they both looked up to find Jason walking out onto the porch with his own glass of wine. He settled into a chair beside Suzie and sipped at his glass.

“I have to admit, Suzie, when you came into town, I never imagined that you would change my life this much,” he glanced over at her with a smile. She could see the lightness in his eyes, and his more relaxed nature. She was sure that he had read the letter. She hoped it meant as much to him as it had meant to her to read it. Though she had never known her uncle very well, she was glad that he thought he could trust her, for whatever reason, and that together with Mary's help, and Jason's instincts, she had been able

to solve the mystery of not just Harry's death, but Samantha's as well.

“To be honest, I never imagined that my life would change this much,” Suzie laughed.

“Me neither,” Mary agreed.

“So, have you two decided are you selling or staying?” Jason asked as he looked between them.

“Staying,” Suzie and Mary said at the same time, and then laughed at one another. “The plan is to finish refurbishing the house and then to see how we go running it as a B & B. We both wanted some excitement in our lives,” Suzie explained to Jason who was grinning.

“And we sure did find it here,” Mary added as she took a sip of her wine. The waves rushed to the shore, crashing, only to retreat again. The sounds and scents that filled the air had a soothing quality that coaxed all three of them into a shared silence of appreciation. Dune House was alive again. What other secrets might its walls hold?

The End

OceanofPDF.com

BOATS AND BAD GUYS

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 2

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

The high-pitched sound of the drill was enough to send a flock of seagulls gathered on the sand, straight up into the sky above the ocean. The sound was coming from deep within Dune House, a majestic home that was one of the oldest buildings in the small seaside town of Garber. Inside the gabled roof and the floor-to-ceiling windows, Suzie Allen was watching with a studious expression as her best friend, Mary, continued to drill holes into the front wall. They were in the main sitting area just inside the front door of the home Suzie had inherited. Together the two friends were renovating the neglected home so it could once again be used as a bed and breakfast. Suzie tilted her head to one side, and then to the other. After leaving her long time career as an investigative journalist she became an interior decorator. This made her very critical of every choice she made.

During the renovations of the house, Suzie preferred to supervise, as opposed to undertake, certain aspects of the renovation. Mary had a little more experience using power tools, as she often had to do her own home improvements on her old house while her husband had neglected their family. The neglect had finally come to a head which resulted in her being recently divorced. Suzie on the other hand, had never had a taste for marriage, and had pursued a career in investigative journalism while Mary raised her children. Though the two women had taken very different paths in life, they had never lost their affection for each other, nor had either failed to support the other. Now, in their fifties they had the opportunity to both work and live together. It was a bit of an adjustment to be under the same roof, but neither woman would have it any other way.

“Are you sure that's the right spot for the painting?” Suzie asked

with uncertainty while Mary focused intently on the job at hand. Suzie's original intention after inheriting the old home was to update it, decorate it, and sell it for a nice profit. But once she had become familiar with it, and its place in the town's history, she changed her plans. She decided to open it as a B & B, and along with Mary, run it as a business they could enjoy and share well into their old age. It was in an ideal location positioned right beside the sea on slightly higher ground than the rest of the town which it overlooked. Suzie's late Uncle Harry and Aunt Beverly used to run it as a B & B, but when Aunt Beverly died Uncle Harry closed it to the public and became a recluse.

"If I put any more holes in this wall it's going to look like swiss cheese!" Mary announced with exasperation as she turned off the drill.

"Hmm," Suzie nodded and laughed softly. "I think you're right. I don't know, something about it just isn't working for me," she said with a deep sigh. "This is the first room that our guests will experience and I want everything to be just perfect."

"Well, what do you think it is?" Mary asked as she carefully climbed down from the ladder. "You're the one with an eye for details."

Suzie took a few steps back and stared up at the large, empty wall. It did have a few extra holes poked in it, but the large painting she was hoping to hang there would cover all of those. The painting that was on the floor leaning against the wall was a panoramic view of a seascape. It was beautiful, and the colors mingled well with the muted tones of blue and green that were scattered throughout the room in the carpeting, the paint on the walls, and the furniture.

"It just leaves me feeling unsettled, as if it doesn't belong," Suzie admitted and shook her head.

"I think it's fine," Mary shrugged and put down the drill on a folding table set up beside the ladder. "But I know it will drive you nuts if we hang it. So, why don't we just focus on something else right now?" she suggested. "Sometimes if you stare at something for too long it stumps you."

"That's true," Suzie smiled warmly at her friend, who knew her very well. "What would I do without you, Mary?" she asked.

"Well," Mary scrunched up her nose and pulled the hair band out of her silver streaked auburn hair letting it fall against her shoulders and back as she looked up at Suzie. "You'd have a lot less

holes, that's for sure."

"Funny gal you are," Suzie winked at her. "I do need to pick up a few things from town. Shall we take a break and see what's going on with the locals?"

"Sure, just give me a minute to get cleaned up," Mary said as she brushed some dust from her shirt.

"Take your time, I need to do something about this hair," Suzie said with a huff and ran her fingers through her brassy blonde hair. She wasn't used to living by the sea, and neither was her hair. The short no fuss no muss cut that had worked in the city, wasn't working so well in her new environment. She paused in the doorway of her room. A shiver ran up along her spine as all of a sudden she felt a sense of being watched. This place did that to her. It seemed as if the walls held many secrets about the past guests that had stayed there. She would often find it hard to believe that the house had been standing for so long. She closed her eyes briefly and dismissed the notion of someone watching her before stepping into the bathroom. She straightened her hair, which she dyed to give her a more youthful and up-to-date look. Then she applied a small amount of mascara to the lashes that framed her bright blue eyes.

Suzie stared in the mirror for a long moment. She was not one to lose confidence with age, she was of the belief that women only grew more beautiful in different ways as they progressed through life. She only wished that she could convince Mary of the same. The divorce had dealt her friend a very hard blow, and Suzie was determined to help her confidence blossom once more. With her own children grown and in college, Mary was no longer a mother on call every hour of the day, and she was no longer a wife. Although both Suzie and Mary saw moving to Garber as a fresh start, Mary still felt a bit lost. However, having the B & B to work on seemed to be helping.

Suzie added some simple gold earrings to her ensemble of straight-legged jeans and a button-down, sleeveless, white blouse. She was enjoying the fact that she didn't have to make an effort to get a tan anymore as she was always on the beach.

Suzie met up with Mary in the hall to find her donning a very large, bright purple, wide-brimmed sunhat.

"What in the world is that monstrosity?" Suzie asked as she looked at the hat.

“Well, I want to protect my skin from drying out which sun protection cream doesn’t do very well,” Mary replied with a slight shrug. “I’ve heard there is a much higher risk of getting sun damage to your skin when you live near the ocean.”

“I've heard there's a much lower risk of romance when potential dates only see a hat,” Suzie replied and bent the brim of the hat upward so that Mary's face was out of the shadows. “There that's better,” Suzie sighed with relief. “Can't hide that beautiful smile.”

Mary smiled in response to Suzie's comment, but she shook her head firmly. “I'm not looking for any dates, Suzie. I need a little more time alone I think.”

“Don't you think being alone for most of your marriage is enough time?” Suzie pressed as tenderly as she could. She was always blunt with Mary, and Mary seemed to love her for it, but she knew that this was a very sensitive situation.

“You're right,” Mary said quietly as her smile faded. “Perhaps I've just become accustomed to being alone. There's something beautiful about solitude, you know.”

“You see beauty, I see an empty chair,” Suzie explained as she looped her arm through Mary's and they walked toward the door of Dune House. “Sometimes I think it will always be empty.”

“It could be worse,” Mary pointed out with a light wink. “Trust me.”

“Well, no matter how our lives have changed, and our paths have veered off in unexpected directions, the important thing to me is that it led us to be here together, which is the best ‘happily ever after’ I could ever think of,” Suzie said as she closed the door behind them.

“Aw Suz, you always say the sweetest things,” Mary giggled and batted her eyes at Suzie. “Are you sure you don't want to marry me?”

“Well, we are already living together,” Suzie mused and as they got into the car they both dissolved into giggles. That was one of the things Suzie loved most about being around Mary, no matter what they were doing, they could always find the humor in it.

Mary fiddled with the radio as Suzie drove along the winding road that led into the town square. It had its tourist traps, but was mostly filled with quaint individually owned shops. The town of Garber's simple beauty and relaxed lifestyle was a very well kept secret.

“I think we should have a nice open house party for the locals when we're done fixing Dune House up,” Mary suggested with a smile. “What do you think?”

“What do I always think, Mary?” Suzie asked as she turned onto the main street that headed through the center of town.

“I don't know, what?” Mary asked hesitantly.

“That you're brilliant,” Suzie grinned at her and Mary laughed.

“Well, at least someone thinks so,” she replied with a smile.

When they reached town Suzie noticed that the main street was dotted with white tents. People were walking along the sidewalks, stopping in the tents and then moving along.

“Looks like they're having some kind of fair,” Mary said as she looked out the window.

“Sure does,” Suzie replied and narrowed her eyes as she peered into one of the tents. “Oh, I think we're in luck, Mary! Let's pull in here,” she pointed to the parking lot beside the library that was being used as the main parking area for the fair.

“Why, what did you spot?” Mary asked with excitement.

“It's an art fair,” Suzie declared as they left the car behind and headed for the white tents. “Maybe we'll find a better picture for the front room.”

Mary groaned teasingly. “A better picture? Why does that make me think I'm going to be drilling more holes?”

“Shh,” Suzie waved her hand and pretended not to hear her friend's concern. She locked the car and they began walking toward the tents. Suzie smiled at a few people, but the locals were still getting used to her. They offered polite smiles in return, but hurried along. Suzie had found most of the people in the town to be friendly enough, especially since her cousin, Jason, was a police officer, but they didn't exactly open up to outsiders. She was okay with that, as she rather preferred her privacy.

The tents along the street were filled with all kinds of interesting items, vendors had their tables set up to display their wares. There were many things to see, from handcrafted jewelry, to shell art made from finds on the local beach, to art created by someone's cat.

“Would you look at this?” Mary giggled as she pointed to a large painting covered in cat paw prints. “How's that for the front room?” she suggested with mirth in her eyes.

“I don't think so,” Suzie grinned. “Let's see what else they have,” she said as she walked along. The warm breeze coming off the

water was enough to soothe her nerves. She was feeling a little anxious about her decision to restore Dune House. It was a huge undertaking, but she was glad she had Mary to do it with. As she reached the next booth a painting immediately caught her eye. It was large and had a gaudy gold frame, but that wasn't what drew her attention. The painting was of the ocean, only it wasn't perfectly calm. There were white crests on the waves. As she peered at it she noticed that there were faint reflections of the buildings along the beach, including Dune House itself.

“Look, Mary!” she gasped as she looked at the painting more closely. In the reflection of the surface of the water she could see people playing on the beach, as well as many of the buildings that lined the beach itself. It was a beautiful depiction of the heart of the town rather than just the scenery surrounding it. It represented the fun and laid back nature of the environment.

“Wow,” Mary said with admiration as she noted the minute details as well. “It's exquisite, I've never seen a painting quite like it,” she nodded. Mary glanced up at the man who was running the booth. “Are you the artist?” she asked timidly.

“No,” the man shook his head as he looked up from the magazine he was reading. He had a thick mustache like a brush and thinning, glossy black hair that hung a little below the collar of his shirt. He studied Mary's large hat for a surprised moment before he offered them both a mild smile. Suzie thought she recognized him from around town but she couldn't place where. “I'm just selling it,” he explained as he set down his magazine which featured fish on the cover. “The artist passed away and these paintings were in her home. There were no heirs so it was relinquished to the town. It's been in storage for some time so now we're selling it off to raise money for a new wing for the library,” he tipped his head in Suzie's direction. “Nice to see you again, ma'am,” he said with a smile.

Suzie realized where she had met him before. “Oh, it's Luther right? You work with Jason, don't you?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said as he stood up from the small stool he was sitting on. His neatly pressed jeans straightened out the moment he stood up. “I've heard about all the hard work you're doing up there at Dune House. I think it's wonderful that you are bringing back such a big part of our town's history.”

“Thank you,” Suzie replied with a warm smile. “I only hope that I can do it justice,” she added modestly.

“You will,” Mary said with confidence.

“We will. Starting with this painting,” Suzie agreed. “How much is it?” she asked as she looked back up at Luther.

“We're asking fifty dollars for it,” he replied with a mild shrug. “Just to be clear, the artist wasn't famous or anything,” he added.

“Only fifty?” Suzie asked, and then realized her mistake. “I mean, I'll take it,” she laughed. “The artist might not have been famous, but what talent she had.”

“Yes, she was very talented,” Luther agreed with a sad smile. “So young, too, and so tragic the way her life ended.”

“Tragic?” Mary asked as Suzie pulled out her wallet and paid for the painting. Luther handed Suzie her change along with a receipt for her purchase.

“Yes. I don't know the whole story but it seems she jumped into the ocean,” he sighed as he gazed at the painting. “Makes you wonder what was going through her mind, that she could see so much beauty, but it wasn't enough for her to want to live.”

“So true,” Mary nodded as she looked back at the painting with a new perspective. “It seems like she loved this town.”

“She would have. She grew up here,” he smiled a bit more. “She always loved to paint, was in the art festival every year,” his voice trailed off for a moment as his smile faded. “This is the only painting she had left in her home.”

“I think it will be perfect for Dune House,” Suzie said with confidence as Luther carefully wrapped the painting in brown paper to protect it.

“Would you like me to take it to your car?” he offered as he looked back up at Suzie. His light brown eyes seemed to light up a little when he looked at her. “Perhaps I could help you hang it?” he suggested.

“No, thank you,” Suzie said politely. “I think Mary and I can manage.”

“Oh, okay,” he nodded and managed a smile. “Thanks for your purchase.”

“You're very welcome, and thanks for the painting,” Suzie grinned.

Mary took one side of the painting and Suzie took the other. The two made their way carefully back to the parking lot. Mary huffed a little as she carried the painting. It was a bit heavier than it looked, and it looked quite heavy to begin with.

“And why did you turn down that fine gentleman's offer?” Mary asked through heavy breaths. “This frame weighs a ton!”

“I didn't really think it would be this heavy,” Suzie admitted as she grunted and did her best to keep her side of the painting even with Mary's. Mary had always been the stronger of the pair.

“He would have been happy to do it, too,” Mary pointed out with annoyance. “He had eyes for you.”

“Oh please,” Suzie shook her head as they finally made it to the car. She let her side of the painting down carefully, then Mary dropped hers down as well.

“What? He was handsome, and kind,” Mary pointed out her voice a little reproachful. “What's so wrong with that? Weren't you the one just talking about the empty chair?” she reminded her friend.

“Nothing's wrong with it,” Suzie admitted as she opened the back door so they could slide the painting in the back seat. “It's just that, well,” she cleared her throat.

“Perhaps you have eyes for a certain captain?” Mary suggested with a smile.

“Mary!” Suzie said with exasperation. “Be careful what you say, small towns have big ears,” she glanced around to be sure that no one was close enough to have overheard.

“And what's so wrong if everyone knows?” Mary asked as she helped Suzie guide the painting into the car. “It isn't as if he doesn't have eyes for you, too,” Mary suppressed a laugh.

“Look Mary, I have a lot on my mind with the B & B, and…” Suzie began to say but Mary cut her off before she could continue to make excuses.

“And, you're a little afraid you might like him a little too much?” Mary suggested as she closed the back door of the car.

Suzie pursed her lips and fixed her friend with an annoyed glare. Mary always had a way of knowing everything that was going on in Suzie's mind, no matter how hard she tried to hide it.

“I just don't know if I want to like him, or him to like me,” Suzie pointed out and shook her head. “Paul's a very nice man, but that doesn't mean that there should be anything between us,” Suzie bit into her bottom lip and frowned. “I mean we’ve only bumped into each other a few times. We haven’t even been on a date.”

“Well, you should,” Mary said with a sheepish smile.

“There's nothing wrong with taking things slow.”

“No, not at all,” Mary agreed innocently as she opened the passenger door. Suzie walked around to the driver's side. Mary met her eyes over the top of the car. “Slow and sensual,” Mary added with a light wink and a faint growl.

“Mary!” Suzie gasped but Mary had already ducked inside the car. By the time Suzie started the car they were both laughing. The truth was Paul was on Suzie's mind, quite often. A little too often. She had never let a man distract her from her work, but sometimes when she looked out over the water, and thought of Paul out there somewhere on his boat, she yearned to join him.

As Suzie drove back to Dune House, she had another person on her mind, the artist of the painting.

“I wonder what could drive a young woman to take her own life?” Suzie asked out loud as Mary gave up on finding any music she liked and turned off the radio.

“Romance,” Mary said with a sage nod. “I am certain it was romance.”

“Do you really think so?” Suzie asked and frowned. “What man could be worth that?”

“It's not so much the man,” Mary said quietly. “It's more the moments.”

“What do you mean by that?” Suzie asked curiously.

“When you share certain moments with a person, those moments will always belong to both of you. My husband was there for the births of both of my children. I can't have that memory alone, to myself. It belongs to him, too. When that person you share such a special moment with, breaks your heart, you don't just grieve the man, you grieve the moment.”

Suzie smiled sympathetically at Mary as she pulled into the driveway of Dune House.

“I'm sorry, Mary, I know that you are going through so much,” she murmured.

“Actually,” Mary managed a smile. “I'm just starting to feel free again. And I have to admit, it's a nice feeling.”

“I'm glad,” Suzie said as she turned the car off and leaned over to hug her friend. “Just remember, the best part of life is that there are always more moments.”

“I guess,” Mary laughed. “I'm pretty sure I know what my next few moments have in store for me. We better get this painting inside before I decide that I'd rather take a nap.”

“Good idea,” Suzie agreed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

Suzie and Mary managed to get the painting up the hill and into the house before they laid it on the floor.

“Wow, that was a work out,” Suzie groaned as she wiped sweat off her forehead.

“It was worth it, though,” Mary said as she tore away some of the brown paper. “It's as perfect as you said it would be.”

Suzie stared at the painting after they had unwrapped it. She studied it for a few minutes, before she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She placed one hand on her hip and tilted her head slightly to the side.

“Well, it is a very nice painting,” she said slowly.

Mary looked up at her incredulously. “Suzie? What are you saying?” she demanded.

Suzie tapped a fingertip against her bottom lip as she looked down at the painting and then up at the wall. “I'm not so sure it fits…” she began to say.

“Oh no!” Mary said as she stood up straight so quickly that she had to reach behind her and lightly massage her lower back. “We just hauled that thing up here. It's staying. It's going on that wall!”

“But Mary,” Suzie shook her head. “Something isn't quite right.”

“What could not be right?” Mary asked with growing exasperation. She was usually incredibly patient, but it was clear that her patience was running thin. “You asked for the perfect painting, and we found it. It's nothing short of a miracle!”

Suzie lifted her eyes to Mary's. She quirked a brow slightly. “A miracle in a hideous gold frame,” she pointed out.

“Oh no…” Mary began, about to lecture her again and then looked down at the frame. “Oh well,” she sighed as she stared at the frame. “I guess you have a point about that.”

“See?” Suzie said and crouched down in front of the painting. “The color is just going to clash with everything.”

“Okay, okay, but wait,” Mary said as she paced back and forth. “We don't have to throw the painting out with the frame, if you know what I mean. We can always replace the frame with a different one.”

Suzie was perfectly still as she thought about this. Then suddenly she stood straight up.

“Mary, you're a genius!” she said gleefully. “We can get the perfect frame for it no problem!”

“What about this one?” Mary pointed to the painting that was still leaning against the wall. “It looks like it's the same size, and it looked nice on the wall.”

“That's true,” Suzie agreed as she glanced between the two paintings swiftly. “Yes, I think that could work! Help me get it onto the big table,” she requested. Together they guided the painting onto the big dining room table.

Suzie carefully released the painting from the frame. She expected she might tear it a little, but it came free surprisingly easily. “I think this is going to work,” she said happily.

“It seems like the painting has been in this frame quite long,” Suzie murmured as she lifted the painting carefully out of the frame. “I wonder how long ago the artist passed?”

She was studying the painting intently, waiting for a response from Mary. When she didn't hear one, she glanced up at Mary. “Mary?” she asked. “What do you think?”

“I think we should figure out what that is,” Mary replied in a whisper as she pointed at the frame.

“Huh?” Suzie glanced down at the frame and her eyes widened. She nearly dropped the painting she was holding. Inside the frame, previously hidden behind the painting was a hand drawn map. It was designed just like a treasure map, with symbols and dashes to represent locations and movements. Suzie's heart began to race as she stared down at the map.

“Do you think it's real?” she asked when she looked up at Mary.

“Well I,” Mary reached up and brushed her hair back from her eyes as she frowned. “I don't know. I mean, are treasure maps ever real? It looks similar to the ones I used to make for the kids at their birthday parties.”

“It could be real,” Suzie said in a murmur and ran a fingertip

along the edge of the map. It lifted easily from the frame. “Why else would she go to all the trouble of hiding it?” she wondered aloud.

“I don't know,” Mary said as she stepped closer to take a look. “Maybe it was just a sentimental thing. I mean, this was the only painting they found of hers.”

“That's true,” Suzie nodded with a hint of disappointment. “I used to love watching the kids go on those treasure hunts,” she mentioned quietly.

“Watching?” Mary laughed and shook her head. “You used to try to beat them to the treasure!”

Suzie smiled guiltily and locked eyes with Mary briefly as a flood of affection rushed through her. She had never wanted children of her own, but she had enjoyed being part of Mary's children's lives. Mary had always made sure she was involved if she wanted to be. It was one of those moments when she reflected on just how deeply Mary's husband had betrayed her. She was a fantastic mother, and a wonderful wife, but no matter what happened in her life, she had never stopped being an amazing friend to Suzie.

“So, what do you think?” Suzie asked with a glimmer of mischief in her eyes.

“Think about what?” Mary asked in return as she narrowed her eyes. “The painting? I think it will be perfect.”

“No, the map,” Suzie said with a roll of her eyes.

“What about it?” Mary asked with a look of confusion.

“Don't you think we should see where it leads?” Suzie pressed impatiently.

“Well, I'm sure it's just some kind of prank,” Mary said with a shake of her head. “Does anyone really make treasure maps anymore? Do you think a pirate drew this?” she laughed a little.

“Mary!” Suzie said with some frustration. “Be serious for just a moment. Why would someone go to the trouble of hiding this if there wasn't something to be found by following it?”

“It could be sentimental,” Mary pointed out with lingering hesitation.

“It could be,” Suzie agreed. “But, even if it is, I'd like to discover that kind of treasure, too. Maybe it leads to a secret spring in the woods, or a tree with special carvings. What could it hurt to try to find out?”

Mary nodded as she smiled mischievously. “I think you're right,

it would be a lot of fun. Plus we'd get to know the area a bit more."

"Now, you're thinking my way," Suzie grinned. She lifted the map carefully out of the frame. "I'd guess that it is the same artist who drew this map," she said thoughtfully. "It looks like it was done by a similar hand."

"Well, that makes sense," Mary nodded as she peered at the map as well. "But it doesn't make much sense."

Suzie laid the map out on the table beside the frame. Maybe it wasn't even a map of an area around Garber. But there was no harm in trying to work out where it led, even if it amounted to nothing. Suzie studied the map a moment longer, very intrigued by the symbols included on it. But she knew that if she got engrossed in it right away she was going to lose track of getting the painting up on the wall.

"Well, I suppose it's a mystery that will have to wait," she said with some disappointment. "We need to get that painting in the other frame and hung up before anything can damage it."

"Yes, and we're losing natural light," Mary said as she tipped her head toward the floor to ceiling windows. Dark clouds had begun rolling in along the water. It gave the splashing waves a desolate look. Suzie felt a twinge of sorrow as she wondered if the sea had looked this way the day that the artist of the painting had plunged into it. It was unsettling to think that such a beautiful sight could turn into something quite deadly.

"Yes, you're right, I'm never going to be certain if I don't see it in natural light."

"Do you think we can use the same holes since we're using the same frame?" Mary asked hopefully as she squinted at the wall.

"It should be fine," Suzie nodded as she locked the painting into the frame from the first painting. "Wow, you were right, Mary this looks so much better," she sighed as she studied the painting.

"And it will be much lighter," Mary laughed.

"Do you think that there's anything hidden in the painting itself?" Suzie wondered as she gazed at it with a deep appreciation.

"I think there are many things hidden in that painting," Mary said softly as she studied all the faint faces that were barely visible etched into the water. She then climbed onto the stepladder.

"Secrets that the artist took to her grave, I'm sure," Suzie said as she helped Mary hoist it up onto the wall while trying to keep the stepladder as steady as possible. Her words were punctuated by a

sharp clap of thunder. Suzie and Mary both gasped with surprise, even though they had been expecting the storm. Before they could even comment on the loud rumbling, there was a knock on the door.

“Knock, knock,” a familiar voice called out as the door of Dune House swung slowly open. Suzie looked up with surprise and then smiled warmly as Paul stepped through the door.

“I hope I'm not interrupting,” he said as he stepped forward quickly to help with the hanging of the painting. Suzie's heart fluttered faintly when Paul's hands brushed over hers to help grasp the frame of the painting. Once it was in place, he let his hands fall back to his sides, and they brushed past Suzie's hands once more. She quickly turned away to hide the heat she felt rising in her cheeks.

“Thanks Paul,” Mary said as she made her way down the ladder. “Well Suzie, what's the verdict?” Mary asked as she took a few steps back to look at the painting.

“It's hard to tell in this light,” Suzie said hesitantly. “But I couldn't imagine a more perfect painting.”

“It is beautiful,” Paul said as he also took in the sight of the painting. “Had I known it was for sale I might have snatched it up myself.”

“Did you know the artist?” Suzie asked quickly.

“No, I'm afraid not,” he shook his head. “I don't spend a lot of time in town. I'm usually on my boat. Otherwise, I tend to keep to myself,” he added.

Suzie was slightly intrigued by his revelation. She hadn't considered that he might be a loner. He seemed so friendly and warm natured. But perhaps that was only when he was around her.

“Some storm coming in,” Mary mentioned as she glanced out the window at the brooding sky.

“Yes, that's why I stopped by,” Paul said in a distant voice as if he was waking from a dream. “I wanted to make sure that you two had everything you needed in case you lose power.”

“I think we're equipped,” Suzie said with a smile. “But thank you for checking on us.”

“These summer storms can be fierce,” Paul added his serious tone returning. “This one should pass by tomorrow afternoon, but I wanted to be sure you didn't need help with anything.”

“I appreciate that,” Suzie said softly, and then added quickly. “I

mean, we both do." Mary was still staring out at the rough waves. She was hugging herself as she stared.

"Mary? Are you okay?" Suzie asked.

"Sorry, I had almost forgotten how frightening the water can be," she murmured.

"In this weather it can be," Paul agreed. "I'll be bunking on land tonight."

"Well, we have some rooms free," Mary suggested innocently. Suzie sent her a withering glare when Paul was looking out over the water.

"Thanks, but I have my regular place," he said mildly.

Suzie's chest tightened at that comment. She wondered if he was talking about a girlfriend's place. She hadn't even really considered that he might already be with someone. But then she told herself to stop being silly as he was probably referring to the motel where they met each other the first time when Suzie had just moved to town.

"We found something inside the frame of the painting," she said abruptly. She was a little surprised that she had mentioned it. She hadn't really intended to tell Paul, but once she had she thought it was a great idea. He would know the water and the beaches better than anyone else.

"What did you find?" he asked curiously.

"It's over there," Mary gestured to the dining room table. He walked over with Suzie to take a look at the map.

"Wow," he said with wide eyes. "This is some piece of art," he breathed out. "Reminds me of playing with friends when I was a boy. We would hide treasure and draw maps in the sand for our friends to follow."

"Well, then you should be an expert," Suzie said with a warm smile. "Just what we need, to find where it leads."

"Really?" he asked and looked right into Suzie's eyes. Suzie was startled by the sudden connection but relaxed the moment his lips spread into a smile of excitement. "I can't wait!" he announced. He looked back down at the map and then tapped his finger lightly against one of the images on the map. "I think I might actually know where this is," he added in a murmur. "It looks like a place very few people know about."

"Are you sure?" Suzie asked with excitement.

"I can't be positive," he said with a slight shake of his head.

“But, from these symbols,” he pointed to the open water depicted in the map, followed by three piles of rocks and a thin stream of water. “From what this shows, it looks like a little inlet that even a boat can't get near.”

“How amazing that you might know where it is,” Mary said happily.

“I could take you both out to find it?” he offered as he looked between the two women. “That is, if you don't mind sharing your treasure hunt.”

“That would be wonderful,” Suzie said with a wide grin.

“Unfortunately, with the weather this bad, I won't be able to take you until it clears,” Paul said. “It wouldn't be safe.”

“That does not sound like fun,” Mary said with a grimace.

“Mary's a little nervous about boats,” Suzie confided in Paul.

“Oh well, that's all right,” he smiled as he looked over at Mary. “I promise not to let you fall off.”

“That is not very reassuring,” Mary said with a short laugh.

Their amusement was silenced by another strong roll of thunder.

“Well, I better get going,” Paul said as he nodded to Mary and smiled at Suzie. “I'll give you a call tomorrow afternoon if the weather is clear. Is that okay with you?”

“That's great,” Suzie nodded. “And thanks again for checking in.”

“If you two run into any trouble, just give me a ring,” Paul said as he walked out the door. The rain had just begun pelting down.

“Are you sure you'll be safe to drive in this?” Suzie asked hesitantly as she looked up at the gathering clouds.

“I'll be fine,” Paul murmured and held her gaze as she looked into his eyes. The moment drew out longer than it should have, before Suzie lowered her eyes.

“Have a good night, Paul,” she said cheerfully and backed away.

His smile didn't falter as he turned and walked toward his car.

Suzie was stealing a glance at him walking away when she felt a sharp smack along the back of her head. It wasn't enough to cause much pain, but it certainly startled her.

“What are you thinking?” Mary demanded as Suzie spun around to face her.

“That my head hurts,” Suzie complained with narrowed eyes and rubbed at the back of her head.

“He came here to check on you, and offered to ferry you around

the neighborhood, and then gave you the 'kiss me now' look!" Mary huffed as Suzie closed the door.

"The what look?" Suzie laughed and shook her head. "Mary, have you been reading some kind of romance novel?"

"I know that look," Mary said sternly. "Just because I was married for so long, doesn't mean I don't have good instincts. Paul was lingering because he hoped for a kiss, and you backed off! Why?" Mary met her friend's eyes, and Suzie realized she wasn't as angry as she was concerned.

"I don't know," Suzie shrugged slightly. "I've made it this far on my own, I guess." Even though Suzie had had her share of male interest over the years she had never really had anyone very serious.

"Trust me, Suzie," Mary said with a slight sigh. "It's much better to have someone checking to see if you're safe."

"Maybe," Suzie frowned. "But what happens when you get used to that? What happens when it gets taken away?"

"Oh," Mary nodded a little. "I suppose you have a point there."

"See, no more smacking," Suzie admonished as she walked back over to the map.

"I still say you're avoiding," Mary warned as she stepped up beside her.

"Nothing to avoid," Suzie insisted. "Maybe the key to finding out more about this map, is finding out more about the artist," Suzie suggested thoughtfully as she continued to study the map.

"Well, I imagine if her death was so tragic there would be a record of it in the local newspaper," Mary suggested.

"I bet there is," Suzie nodded. "Good thing we know of a friendly librarian, hmm?"

"I don't know if friendly is the right word," Mary laughed a little. "But I'm sure that Louis would help us out."

"We're not going anywhere tonight," Suzie said with disappointment as the wind whipped by the window.

"No, but we can try to head out first thing in the morning," Mary yawned. "I'm a little worn out from toting that painting around."

"Me, too," Suzie agreed. As they walked down the hall toward the kitchen, Suzie felt that strange uneasy feeling once more. She glanced toward the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the kitchen. It was too dark to see clearly but for a split-second she thought for

sure that someone was standing outside, looking in.

“Mary,” Suzie gasped as she grabbed Mary's arm. “Do you see that?”

“What?” Mary asked as she peered at the window. “I don't see anything there,” she yawned again.

When Suzie looked again, she didn't see anything either. “I guess it is nothing,” she sighed. “Let’s have something to eat and then an early night. We need to get some good rest. We hunt for treasure tomorrow!”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, Suzie woke up with the memory of the face in the window on her mind. She was still feeling uneasy about it. The storm had died down to a steady rain with an occasional gust of wind. When Suzie paused beside Mary's room she could hear her light snoring. Suzie grabbed her jacket and her boots and threw them on over her pajamas. She didn't want to wait any longer to check on what she thought she had seen the night before.

As Suzie opened the door to step outside she felt a rush of cool air. It felt almost icy compared to the balmy beach weather she had become used to. She tightened her jacket around her neck and walked around the side of the large house. When she neared the kitchen she studied the sand for any sign of footprints. But the way the rain was pelting down made it clear that any evidence from the night before had likely been washed away. As she stepped closer to the window she noticed something. Small smudges on the glass. She was very careful to clean the windows, and knew that neither she nor Mary had touched the glass since it was cleaned. She frowned as she studied them. They were nothing more than nearly invisible blemishes. It would be hard for anyone to take them as evidence of someone looking in from outside. But Suzie just couldn't shake the certainty that someone had been there the night before.

When she felt a hand touch her shoulder, Suzie nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Ah!” she cried out as she spun to face whoever was touching her. “I have mace!” she shouted with her eyes half-closed.

“You have pajamas,” Mary pointed out and tried not to laugh. “I'm sorry if I scared you. I thought you heard me coming.”

“Oh Mary, you nearly gave me a heart attack,” Suzie sighed and laid her hand against her chest.

“Well honestly, I thought you might be sleep-walking. I saw you out here through the kitchen windows and you were staring so blankly at the glass that I thought maybe you had wandered out,” Mary frowned and studied Suzie intently. “Why exactly are you standing out here in the rain in your pajamas?”

Suzie didn't want to frighten her friend so she didn’t tell Mary about the fingerprints and the face she had seen, especially when she had no proof that anything had really happened.

“Just wanted some fresh air,” Suzie said softly.

Mary narrowed her eyes as if she did not believe her, but she did not press.

“Well, come inside before you get sick,” Mary insisted and tugged at her friend's arm.

“First you try to give me a heart attack, and now you're concerned about my health?” Suzie joked to break the tension.

“I didn't mean to,” Mary insisted. “Let's get some breakfast. I think that the weather is mild enough for us to head to the library, don't you?”

“Have you been dreaming about treasure maps?” Suzie asked as they stepped back into Dune House.

“Maybe,” Mary replied with a short laugh. “I'll get some breakfast going for us, you go get dried off and dressed.”

As Suzie changed, her mind traveled back to the fingerprints on the window. Was it possible that someone really had been outside the night before? If so, who could it be? She was still feeling unsettled as she had breakfast with Mary. She tried to distract herself with talk of looking for where the map might lead them.

“What do you think it could be?” Suzie asked as she took the last bite of her eggs.

“I just hope it's nothing too sad,” Mary said with a frown. “She did kill herself after all, maybe the map leads to some of the reasons why.”

“Maybe, I hadn't thought of that,” Suzie said in a murmur. “It could be something like a final confession.”

“Well, the best way to find out is to ask,” Mary said as she cleared the breakfast dishes. Suzie washed and dried them while Mary was getting ready to go. Suzie noticed as they left Dune House that Mary had applied a modest amount of pale pink lipstick. She smiled a little to herself as she realized her friend was beginning to experiment with her looks again. To Suzie that meant that she was

beginning to come out of the painful fog of her divorce. As they drove to the library the wind was still whipping wildly. It didn't affect the roads much, but the waves were large and intimidating as they crashed against the shore.

“Good thing Paul's on land,” she muttered to herself as she turned down the main street toward the library. There was no sign of the art fair that had taken place the day before.

“I'm still so nervous about going out on the water with him,” Mary sighed and shook her head. “I know I shouldn't be, but I remember what it was like to be out in the middle of the water on that awful cruise ship. It just seems like there's no way to get back to land. It makes me a little scared.”

“Try not to worry too much, Paul won't take us out on the water unless it's safe,” Suzie assured her as she parked the car in the library's parking lot.

“Look at you, already trusting,” Mary said with a playful smile as she stepped out of the car. Suzie stepped out as well and shook her head as they walked toward the library.

“Stop it, Mary, it's not going to happen,” she said firmly.

“Sure,” Mary nodded as she opened the door for Suzie and they escaped the rain that was coming down a little harder.

When they walked into the library, their footsteps muffled by thick carpet, Suzie spotted Louis who was busy with a sticky-fingered toddler. The child seemed to think that a book about ice cream was for licking, not reading.

“Ugh,” Suzie cringed and looked away from the sight.

“Isn't he adorable?” Mary cooed as she watched the child slobber all over the book.

“If you say so,” Suzie laughed and began looking over the books on the sale table. As she was sorting through them she had a strange feeling. She couldn't quite place what it was, but she just felt uneasy. She looked up and glanced over her shoulder. Yet again it felt as if someone might be watching her. Shaking off the sensation she turned back to the books on the table. There wasn't anything of much interest to her, so when Mary called to her she headed over without hesitation.

“Look at this,” she said as she handed her a thin book.

“What is it?” Suzie asked as she glanced over the images on the cover. It was more like a booklet than a book.

“It showcases all the local artists in Garber and the nearby

towns," Mary explained. "Turn to the first page."

When Suzie opened the book she found a similar painting to the one she had purchased, pictured on the glossy page. The artist's name was printed underneath the picture.

"Alexandria Black," Suzie read in a soft tone. "I wonder if there's a picture," she flipped to the back of the booklet where there were a few small black and white photographs of the artists. She found Alexandria's name and was surprised by the picture beside it. The young woman in the picture was smiling warmly. She had hair that flowed down over her shoulders in luxurious waves. Her soft features were very pretty, and her expression was eager, without a hint to what the future would hold for her.

"Oh Mary, look how young she was," Suzie said with a shocked gasp.

"She couldn't be much older than my daughter," Mary said with a frown. "I couldn't imagine feeling so desolate at such a young age."

Alexandria was smiling right into the camera, and Suzie could detect pride in her eyes. She might have just been in her twenties. She appeared so full of life it was hard to believe that she was no longer living.

"Hello Mary, Suzie," Louis nodded at both women as he walked up to them. "Sorry for the wait," he pushed his glasses up along his nose and peered at the book Suzie was holding. "Are you still looking for some art for Dune House?" he asked curiously.

"Actually, I found the perfect painting," Suzie admitted as she held the book out to him. "But now I'm curious about the artist of the painting. Do you know anything about Alexandria Black?" she asked.

"Oh," a dark expression consumed Louis' otherwise plain features. His brown eyebrows knitted and he looked from the picture of Alexandria then up at Suzie with hesitation. "Yes, I do know a few things about her," he said softly.

"Are you okay, Louis?" Mary asked with concern as his voice trembled slightly when he spoke.

"I'm sorry," he forced a smile on his lips. "It's just she was a friend of mine."

"She was?" Suzie asked with surprise and then realized what that meant. "Oh Louis, I'm sorry for your loss."

"Oh, it was some time ago," he shrugged a little. "Maybe ten

years," he added and then briefly closed his eyes. "I was quite good friends with her late father. When we were younger we used to go fishing together and he often used to bring his young daughter with," he said with a faraway look. "He died quite young. She and I weren't terribly close, but when someone you know does something like that, it is hard to get passed," he shook his head as if he was still in disbelief about it.

"So, she did commit suicide?" Suzie asked as gently as she could. It was a very sensitive topic to broach.

"Yes," he sighed as he glanced toward the front window of the library. "She jumped off a cliff, not far from Dune House actually," he cleared his throat. "It was a shock for the whole town. She was well-known for her artwork and she was very generous with it. She would donate it to the local museums and even here to the library. Well that is, until she sold it all off."

"Was she struggling with depression?" Mary asked tentatively.

"That's the thing," Louis said with a shake of his head. "She was never depressed, at least not that I saw. I mean I know that people can hide these things, but she was the last person I would expect to be depressed. She was always so warm, and had a kind thing to say about everyone she met. Even that screw-up she married."

"Screw-up?" Suzie pressed curiously, it was the first she had heard of a husband. "She looks so young to have been married," she added.

"She married him at eighteen. Thought she was in love. I tried to warn her, a few of her friends did. Darren was from a few towns over, I forget which one now. He wasn't a bad guy, but he was always getting into bad situations. She was always defending him and was always supporting him. They seemed so in love. But, he was determined he was going to be rich, and would try just about anything to make that happen. Not long before she passed away he was arrested, and I guess with him being in prison, it might have sent her into a deep depression that no one noticed," Louis shrugged slightly. "She sold all of her paintings but one, and most of her belongings to try to get him out of prison, but there was nothing anyone could do. It's the only thing that makes any sense. Who can know what's really going on in someone's mind, right?"

"Right," Mary agreed gently. Suzie was staring down at the photograph of Alexandria. It was hard to believe that such a youthful smile could be hiding all of the difficulties she had faced.

“So sad to see such a talent wasted,” she said with a sigh.

“Yes, it was. She was so desperate to help him. She became obsessed with trying to get him released. No one understood, because it was clear he was guilty, he never even tried to claim he was innocent,” he frowned. “Once all of her artwork was gone she had nothing left to sell. Maybe she just gave up.”

“What was so special about the one she kept, do you know?” Mary asked as she looked intently at Louis. “We bought one of her paintings yesterday, it must be the one she held onto as it was part of her estate.”

“Oh?” Louis asked with surprise. “Well, they must have got around to clearing out some storage. I know she always had her favorite. She wouldn't ever really tell me why it was her favorite, but after Darren was arrested I would always find her sitting and staring at it when I dropped by to check on her.”

Suzie's eyes widened slightly. She wondered if the painting was never sold because Alexandria knew the map was hidden inside the frame. If that was the case then the map had obviously been important to her, which might mean it could lead to something valuable after all.

“Are there any articles about her death, or her husband's arrest?” Suzie asked hopefully.

“I'm sure there's something. I'll bring up the dates for you,” he said and headed back to his desk. “Is there a reason you're so interested?” he asked.

“I just think the painting is beautiful,” Suzie said with a faint smile. “It might seem silly but it seemed as if I was guided to it. I'd like to know as much as I can about the artist who could create something so stunning.”

“Yes, she had a way of capturing nature,” Louis agreed and printed out a list of pages. “Here are the pages and dates of the newspapers that mention Alexandria's name, or Darren's. Let me know if you need any help with the microfilm,” he added.

“Thanks, Louis,” Mary said as she took the paper. “And I'm sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” Louis said with a slight smile. “It's been some time since I thought of Alexandria. It's nice to remember the good memories.”

Suzie and Mary walked to the back of the library where the machine was located.

Suzie sat down in front of the screen and Mary pulled up a chair beside her. They began perusing the articles for the dates that Louis had mentioned.

“Look, there,” Mary said as she pointed to a small article almost hidden by large ads. “Local artist meets a tragic end,” she read the title of the article.

Suzie zoomed into the article and looked at the picture of the artist.

“Alexandria Black was found today at the bottom of Alba's Cliff,” she read in a whisper. “It's believed that she committed suicide. No further information is available at this time.”

“It doesn't say much, does it?” Mary said with a sigh. “It's sad to think that her life could be summed up in so few words. Didn't she have any family?”

“It doesn't list anything about family,” Suzie said with a frown. “It seems that perhaps she only had her husband after her father died. Imagine how he must have felt getting news like that while being locked up?”

Mary shook her head. “This whole thing is just too sad.”

“It is sad,” Suzie agreed. “But it's also intriguing. The article doesn't mention her husband, but Louis said there might be articles about the day he was arrested. I wonder what he's in for?”

“Let's take a look,” Mary replied. Suzie flipped through the articles until she came to the date that Louis had given them. Splashed across the front page of the newspaper was an article about three men getting arrested for armed robbery.

“Wow,” Mary said as she read the title of the article. “Three men arrested for armed robbery,” she shook her head. “That's more than getting in a little bit of trouble.”

“It says that Darren Black was one of the three men who robbed Washington Bank. They were caught two days later, and arrested, but the money was never recovered,” Suzie said with a light cluck of her tongue. “Darren got himself into some serious trouble.”

“Do you think he's still in prison?” Mary wondered out loud.

“I think he would be with that charge,” Suzie replied as she flipped through the articles. “We should visit the prison and see what he has to say about this painting.”

“The prison?” Mary asked with wide eyes. “I'm not sure I'd want to go there.”

“Well, it looks like if we want to visit Darren Black we're going

to have to head to the local cemetery instead," Suzie said as her eyes fell on another article related to Darren.

"Is he dead?" Mary asked as she read over the article as well.

"He was killed during a prison riot," Suzie said softly. "Not more than a year after Alexandria died."

"Incredible," Mary shook her head. "I guess we've reached a dead end then," she said with some disappointment. "With Alexandria gone, and Darren gone, there's no one to give us any more insight into that map."

Suzie sat back in her chair. Her eyes were narrowed and her lips pursed.

"Uh oh, what are you brewing in that mind of yours?" Mary asked suspiciously as she recognized the expression.

"I'm just thinking," Suzie said innocently.

"About what?" Mary pressed.

"Well, the stolen money was never recovered. But all three men who stole it were arrested," Suzie pointed out.

"And?" Mary asked.

"And, it's likely they stashed the money somewhere, right?" Suzie asked, her eyes lighting up.

"You think the map leads to the stolen money?" Mary asked with wide eyes. "You think Alexandria knew about it?"

"Think about it," Suzie nodded. "She and Darren were head over heels in love, they only had each other. If Darren did something as wild as rob a bank, who do you think he would trust the money with or at the very least the location of the money?"

"But, if Alexandria knew where the money was, why would she jump off a cliff?" Mary asked. "She could have been a very rich woman. She would have had more than enough to set up a beautiful life for herself and Darren when he got out. Do you think she did it out of guilt?"

"I would think if she was feeling guilty she would have just turned the money in," Suzie said thoughtfully. "What would drive her to jump?"

"Maybe the secret was too much pressure," Mary suggested in a whisper.

"Or maybe, she didn't jump at all," Suzie said with a raised eyebrow.

"What are you saying, Suzie?" Mary asked with a gasp and then lowered her voice. "Do you think Alexandria was murdered?"

“I think we need to find out more about all of this,” Suzie said sternly.

“But how?” Mary asked. “It doesn't sound like any of Alexandria's friends knew what was happening in her life. With Darren gone, there's no one else to ask.”

“Maybe not,” Suzie said and shook her head. “But I'm not willing to let go of this little mystery yet.”

Just as she spoke her cell phone began to ring shrilly. She answered it quickly and ducked her head to avoid the admonishing glances from other people at the library.

“Hello?” she asked.

“Hi Suzie, it's me Paul,” Paul said nervously.

“Hi Paul,” Suzie instantly smiled, and then forced her expression to be more casual when she saw Mary eying her suspiciously.

“Listen, I know I promised to take you and Mary out on the water today, but it's still pretty choppy out there. I think we're better off waiting until tomorrow afternoon. Is that all right with you?”

“Of course it is,” Suzie replied though she couldn't hide a twinge of disappointment. “No point in treasure hunting if we're going to end up stranded instead.”

“I wouldn't let that happen,” Paul promised her. “But from the weather report the sea is going to be pretty wild for most of the night tonight, it's best to wait until it's calm.”

“Thanks Paul,” Suzie said quickly. “I'm looking forward to it, any time we can go.”

“Me too,” Paul admitted. “Did you weather the storm okay?” he asked.

“We were fine,” Suzie promised him.

“Let's plan for two in the afternoon tomorrow, okay?” he suggested.

“Sounds great, thanks again,” Suzie said before hanging up the phone. “Looks like we're stuck on dry land today,” Suzie said with a sigh as she looked at Mary.

“Like you said, Paul is cautious,” Mary smiled.

“Well, he did say the weather is going to get a little wild this evening, so maybe we should head back. There are some things I can get done around the house while we wait out this storm,” Suzie suggested. As they left the library Louis waved to them.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

When Suzie and Mary arrived back at Dune House it was hard for Suzie to focus on the tasks at hand. She wanted more than anything to know what had happened to Alexandria, and where the map led. Mary was rummaging around in the kitchen when she suddenly laughed.

“All this running in and out of town and we're completely out of bread, cereal and coffee,” she groaned. “I can't believe I forgot to pick some up.”

“We'll go back and grab it,” Suzie said as she picked up the car keys.

“That's all right, I'll go,” Mary said. “I know you have things you want to do here. Plus, there were a few books at the library I was interested in. I got distracted when we began looking at the microfilm. I'll be back in just a little while.”

Suzie sensed that Mary might want some time alone, so she didn't push it. “Just be careful of the weather,” Suzie said as she dropped the keys into her hand.

“I will be,” Mary promised her. “No finding any treasure while I'm gone, please!” she called back over her shoulder as she headed out the door.

Suzie smiled as she watched her friend leave. She knew that Mary was still dealing with the emotions of her divorce, and some of what she was experiencing was impossible for Suzie to understand. She had never had her heart broken, and she hoped she never would.

As she began folding the linens she had recently washed that would go in the rooms that she was finished decorating, her mind drifted back to Alexandria. She imagined the young woman, so in love, and what it must have been like for her if Darren left the

money with her. Alexandria had probably been terrified, and then crushed when Darren was arrested. Justice was served, but Alexandria had been permanently wounded in the process. Still, Suzie found it hard to believe that she could have jumped off the cliff. She finished folding the linens and pulled on some rubber gloves to continue working on one of the bathrooms that needed a lot of attention.

“Hello?” a rough voice called out. Suzie tensed as she heard the door bang against the outside wall. Someone had swung it open very hard. She pulled off her gloves and walked toward the front door very cautiously.

“Hello?” she replied as she took note of the two men standing just inside the door. One was tall and very thick, as broad as any bear she had seen. His hair was disheveled half-splayed across his forehead and hanging in his eyes, something between brown and black. He was glowering at her in a way that made her very uneasy. The man beside him was just as tall but was as thin as a pole. His eyes were dark and narrowed as they settled on Suzie. For a brief moment she thought she knew them from somewhere, but the moment passed as the thin man began to speak.

“We're looking for a room,” he said gruffly and took a step further into the house without being invited. “This looks like a good place,” he added, though his voice did not indicate a compliment.

“Oh, I'm very sorry but we're not open for business yet,” Suzie replied her heart starting to beat faster. Something about the two men made her think she was in danger. She wasn't sure if it was their manner of dress which was sloppy at best, or the fact that neither had managed even the slightest smile or warmth in their tone. She glanced nervously over her shoulder, well aware that she was alone in Dune House. Then she looked back at the two men, hoping they would take the hint and leave.

“I'm sure you've got a bed we can sleep in,” the thin man said and reached up to adjust the baseball cap he was wearing. It had no image on it, just a solid black cap. “We don't need much, just a roof over our heads. Would you deny us that?” he asked in a polite tone, but his eyes remained just as cold.

“Again, I'm very sorry,” Suzie said quickly, she didn't want word to get around that she wasn’t welcoming to guests. “But we can't host any guests until Dune House is officially open, it's an insurance issue,” she explained with a slight shrug.

“Sure, insurance,” the bear-sized man muttered with a shake of his head. Suzie was startled when he spoke as he had been staring at her with a sneer in silence for quite some time. “We're not going to report anything to any insurance. Are we Al?” he asked the thin man.

“That may be true,” Suzie said cordially, she was becoming more and more anxious with the two of them blocking the door. “But, I can't take that kind of risk. I'm sure you understand. There is a fine motel a mile or so down the beach. I'm sure they will have a room available.”

“Hmm, I get the point,” the tall, thin man, Al, nodded. “Let's go George, we're not wanted here.”

Suzie felt some relief as she watched the two men turn to leave. But George stopped and turned back to look at her.

“Do you have a restroom I could use?” he asked, his hard eyes boring into her, his broad shoulders tense and his muscles flexed. She was well aware she would not be capable of defending herself against a man his size.

Suzie was normally one to be welcoming and accommodating to anyone. But she had learned enough about people during her time as an investigative reporter to know when there was a potential for danger.

“Sorry, waiting for the plumber,” she said swiftly and glanced down at her hands. It was a lie, but there was no way she was going to let them get passed her and further into the house. She was certain there was something off about them. She had the same uneasy feeling she had when she found the fingerprints and when she was in the library.

“Did you hear that, Al?” George asked as he looked over at the skinny man. “She's waiting on the plumber,” he chuckled as if that was some kind of inside joke between the two men and then shook his head as he walked out through the door. Al followed close behind him, slamming the screen door shut as he left. Suzie was so relieved to see them go that she quickly closed and locked the door. She was used to working with the door open so that people could come and go as they pleased, but she realized she might have to change that policy.

She was still a little unnerved by the visit from the strange men when she heard a pounding on the door. She looked up from the table she had been cleaning and stared at the door. She waited to

see if whoever was knocking would leave.

“Suzie?” Mary called through the door. “Are you in there?”

Suzie smiled and walked over to open the door. Mary looked confused as she stepped inside and Suzie took one of the bags of groceries that Mary was carrying.

“Why was the door locked?” she asked as she followed after Suzie with the other bag of groceries.

“I'm sorry, I just had a strange visit from two men, and I felt uncomfortable leaving it unlocked,” Suzie explained as she began pulling the cold and frozen items out of the bags.

“Two men?” Mary asked and began taking the canned food out. “What was strange about them?”

“They wanted to rent a room,” Suzie muttered as she stacked the last of the frozen food in the freezer. Mary had bought much more than the items she had gone out for.

“Well, that's not so strange, it is a B & B after all,” Mary replied with a short laugh.

“I know, but it was the way they spoke to me,” Suzie shivered a little. “Their eyes were just...” she hesitated for a moment as she tried to come up with the right word.

“Mean? Cold?” Mary suggested and finished stacking the cans.

“Cruel,” Suzie said with a light snap of her fingers. “That's it, they were cruel.”

“Oh, that doesn't sound good at all,” Mary said with a frown. “Maybe we should have Jason come by and check things out? Or at least let him know?”

“No, I don't think we need to get Jason involved,” Suzie shook her head. “I don't want to go running to him all the time. He has a very busy life,” she muttered.

“Hmm,” Mary folded up the cloth grocery bags and tucked them in the cabinet beside the refrigerator. “Well, if you see them again you need to say something. And from now on we'll keep that door locked. This might be a small town, but crime still does happen.”

“Yes, at least until we open,” Suzie agreed. But as she stared wistfully through the tall kitchen windows she found herself wondering if that would be enough. She still felt a sense of discomfort, and she simply couldn't shake it.

“Do you think that the weather will be clear enough tomorrow for us to go on our treasure hunt?” Mary asked. Suzie could tell she was hoping to distract her from the current topic.

“I hope so,” Suzie said.

“I'm still not so sure about getting on that boat,” Mary winced.

“It'll be fine,” Suzie promised her and offered a warm smile. “I know that you're not a fan of being out on the open water, but I think if you give it a chance you might actually enjoy yourself. It won't be anything like the cruise, I promise,” Suzie added.

“I find that very hard to believe,” Mary said with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, I don't think Paul is going to serve bad seafood and insist on line dancing,” Suzie pointed out with a grin.

“I bet you wouldn't mind too much if he did,” Mary winked at her.

“Paul is just a friend,” Suzie stated firmly but she had to turn away from Mary to hide the blush rising in her cheeks.

That night Suzie could barely sleep. Every time she closed her eyes she saw George and Al blocking the doorway of Dune House. When she finally fell asleep the dream she found herself in was unsettling. She was on the boat, Paul was smiling at her. Mary was waving at her with a big grin. It was a beautiful day. The sky was clear. But Suzie was feeling uneasy. She looked up at the sky to see a swirling tornado headed straight toward them.

Neither of them seemed to notice the certain disaster that was headed straight for them.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew it couldn't be real, but it was happening right before her eyes.

“Mary!” she cried out. Her voice woke her from her sleep. She sat straight up in bed.

“Suzie?” Mary said as she burst into her room. “Are you okay?” she asked when she sat down beside Suzie on the bed.

Suzie drank in the sight of Mary with great relief. “I'm sorry,

Mary, I just had a bad dream."

"Oh, Suzie, it's okay," Mary promised her and hugged her gently. She studied Suzie with deep concern in her eyes. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I..." Suzie opened her mouth to speak further, but something stopped her. She didn't want to tell Mary what she had seen. "I don't want to get on that boat today."

"Suzie, don't say that," Mary frowned. "Weren't you the one telling me that everything would be fine?"

"What if the weather is bad?" Suzie pointed out with anxiety in her voice.

"The weather is perfect," Mary said firmly. "And like you said Paul would never let us out on the water if he thought it was the slightest bit dangerous. You're just under a bit of stress, Suzie, and that can make your mind create some wild things in your sleep."

"I'm sure you're right," Suzie frowned. She wanted to believe that, too. But her dream had her rattled. "We have some time this morning. I think I do want to go and talk to Jason," she said with a heavy sigh.

"About the two men yesterday?" Mary asked.

"About Alexandria Black," Suzie said with a slight shake of her head. "For some reason I can't get her out of my head. I don't think I'm going to be able to get any rest until I do."

"All right," Mary nodded. "Let's head for the police station first thing, okay? I've already got some coffee going."

"Thanks, Mary," Suzie said and hugged her friend.

After they had their coffee and a quick bite to eat, Suzie and Mary headed back into town. The rain had died down to a light drizzle, and the roads were clear of any debris. The waves were fairly calm, and Suzie was sure that Paul would be ready to take the boat out.

The day before that was all she was hoping for, but after her dream, she was dreading getting out onto the water.

The police station was quiet as it always seemed to be. Suzie held the door open for Mary as they stepped inside. There was a police officer snoozing behind the large front desk. Other officers were milling about near the coffee pot. Suzie spotted Jason leaning over a desk discussing something with a man in plain clothes, who she assumed to be a detective.

“Maybe we shouldn't bother him,” Mary said hesitantly. “He looks like he's busy.”

“Busy discussing fantasy football or something like that I'm sure,” Suzie said with a wink. She waved to Jason until her movement got his attention. He glanced up at her with surprise at first and then smiled as he walked over.

“What are you up to today, Suzie?” he asked and nodded politely at Mary.

“I was wondering if you could fill us in on some details about a case,” Suzie said eagerly. Jason ran his hand back over his cropped red hair and studied the two intently.

“What kind of case?” he asked.

“Robbery,” Mary said quickly.

“Murder,” Suzie replied.

Jason's eyes widened. “I thought you were going to ask me about trespassing or something, what are you two involved in?”

“Well, we stumbled across something very interesting,” Suzie admitted. She studied her cousin intently. She didn't know him very well, but so far he had demonstrated that she could trust him. Still, she proceeded with caution. “It's a painting that belongs to a local artist,” she explained. “We wanted to know more about her, so we began searching for information. Her story is very intriguing, and we were just hoping that you might be able to fill in some of the gaps.”

“What local artist?” Jason asked, though his gaze was skeptical as he looked between the two. “Why do I feel like you're not telling me the whole story?”

“Alexandria Black,” Mary said quickly before Jason could investigate their intent any further.

“Oh,” he nodded and then glanced over his shoulder at the other officers. “That's a bit of a ghost story around here.”

“Is it?” Suzie asked as she leaned a little closer to him. “How

about the husband? Darren Black?"

Jason shifted uncomfortably and then steered Suzie and Mary over toward a quiet corner.

"Listen, I was a bit younger than Alexandria at school and Darren only moved to Garber when he married Alexandria. I didn't really know them but I knew of them. As you both know, this is a town that doesn't like its dirty laundry aired," he looked directly at Suzie. "If you have questions I'll do my best to answer them, but it's best to keep this as quiet as possible."

"Why?" Suzie asked. "I don't understand why it's such a big issue?"

"We don't see a lot of crime in this town," Jason explained and rested his hand lightly on the gun holstered at his hip. "So, when one of the locals commits suicide not long after her husband committed an armed robbery, it was just one of those things that everyone did their best to avoid talking about."

"Sounds a little behind the times," Mary said with a slight frown.

"Maybe so," Jason nodded. "But the point is, if you want to get along well in this town, you don't want to create a stir."

"I see what you're saying," Suzie nodded. "And honestly I'm not trying to. But I would like to know more about Alexandria's death."

Jason furrowed his eyebrows and studied his cousin with disbelief. "She threw herself off a cliff, what more is there to know?" he asked.

"If she really did throw herself off a cliff," Suzie replied with confidence.

"What are you talking about?" Jason asked with a little anger rising in his voice. "Are you trying to say that her death was somehow covered up?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all," Suzie replied swiftly as she realized she might have offended him. "It's just that in my experience sometimes what looks like a suicide, might not be a suicide."

He narrowed his eyes a little further and then nodded slowly. "I guess in some cases that might be true, but I doubt it is in this case."

"Why?" Mary asked. "Is there something about the case that makes you certain it was a suicide?"

"Well, she left a note," Jason said with a frown. "It's pretty

evident that when someone leaves a note their intent was to say goodbye."

"I didn't realize she left a note," Suzie said with some disappointment. "Do you still have it?"

"I'm sure we have a copy in her file," Jason said with a sigh. "I'll go get it."

"Thanks Jason," Suzie replied with a smile

He nodded as he walked away.

"I guess she really did commit suicide," Mary said softly.

"It sure looks that way," Suzie admitted. "But I still wonder what happened to that money. Maybe the note will give us some kind of clue."

"Here, let's go sit at that table over there," Jason said with the files in his hands as he pointed to a small table and chairs at the far side of the station. The three walked over to the table.

Once they were settled Jason flipped open Alexandria's file.

"Here's the note," Jason said. It was a short, handwritten note that seemed to be straight to the point. "Goodbye world, goodbye pain," Jason read in a quiet voice.

"That's it?" Mary asked with surprise.

"Seems to be," Jason replied matter-of-factly.

"Well, I guess it sums everything up," Mary pointed out mildly.

"Does it though? I mean why go to all the trouble of writing a note, if you're not going to give some explanation of why you were jumping to your death?" Suzie shook her head. "It still doesn't sit right with me."

"Suicide sometimes has no explanation," Mary frowned. "People make impulsive choices. Maybe she just decided she was done with life, and scribbled out a note in case no one found her."

"Maybe," Suzie sighed. "Is there anything of interest in Darren's file?"

"He was arrested along with two other men," Jason said as he opened the file on the table in front of him. "It looks like they'd been planning this for some time. He got the most time out of all three because the other two insisted he was the mastermind of the plan. However, he denied that."

"Two against one is not favorable odds," Suzie said with a slight shake of her head. Then she looked down at the file. The faces of the three men that stared up at her were slightly distorted by the poor quality of the prints, but there was no mistaking what she saw.

She held her breath as she didn’t want to tell Jason what she recognized in front of her.

“There’s a phone call for you, Jason,” one of the officers called out to him.

“I’ll be back in a second,” Jason said as he closed the files and walked over to his desk to take the call.

“Mary!” Suzie gasped, and then covered her mouth when several officers looked in their direction. “Those two men with Darren in the photograph were the two men who came to the house yesterday,” she hissed. “Their names were Al and George.”

“Are you sure?” Mary asked as she slid her chair closer to Suzie's. “Their names were different in the file.”

“I'm sure they were using aliases,” Suzie said and narrowed her eyes. “I know it was them. I'd know those eyes anywhere.”

“Yes, they were quite menacing,” Mary agreed as she recalled the two men in the photograph. “To think you were alone with two criminals!” she frowned.

“But why were they there?” Suzie asked. “That's the important question. Obviously they weren't there just to rent a room.”

“Are you thinking that they were looking for the map?” Mary asked with a tremor of fear in her voice. “That they're after the money that Alexandria hid?”

“The map or something else that would lead them to the money,” Suzie pointed out. “It's the only thing that makes sense. They must have found out we bought the painting for Dune House and were trying to get to it.”

“To be fair, they did grow up nearby. Maybe they were just visiting for old time's sake? How could they know that we had purchased the painting?” Mary asked skeptically. “Unless,” her voice trailed off for a moment. “I guess that Luther could have told someone.”

“Small town, big ears,” Suzie reminded her. “Word travels fast, too. Maybe they heard about Alexandria's possessions going on sale and decided to show up to purchase them in the hope that something would give them a clue. But when they arrived we had already purchased the painting, so they wanted to rent a room in the house in the hope of getting a closer look at it.”

“Or even so that they could steal the painting,” Mary said quietly. “Oh, how frightening, to think that we could have been sleeping under the same roof as those awful men,” she growled and

shook her head. “I have no patience for thieves. I'm sorry you faced them alone, Suzie.”

“It's okay,” Suzie shook her head with a gasp. “I'm sure they were spying on me through the kitchen window, and then again at the library. They must be following us all around town!” She glanced up quickly to survey everyone who was in the police station. But all of the men and women she saw were either in uniform, or people she recognized.

“That's probably why they came while I was gone!” Mary groaned. “They must have been watching and saw that you were alone.”

“Well, if they are here for the map, then they are not going to stop looking for the map, or the money,” Suzie said with a frown. “We need to figure out where that map leads and fast,” she glanced at her watch and then nodded. “We've got an hour before we're supposed to meet Paul at the docks. There's one more thing I want to look into,” she said as she stood up from the table and Jason hung up the phone and started walking toward them.

“Sorry about that. Is there anything else you need?” he offered as he reached the table.

“Tell him, Suzie,” Mary prompted her friend. Jason looked at Suzie expectantly. His serious expression, and the badge shimmering on his chest made Suzie hesitate. She was afraid that if she told him the truth, about the map and the men searching for it, he would demand that she turn over the map and prevent her from finding out where it led.

“Tell me what?” Jason asked, his eyes narrowing as he studied Suzie. “Is there something I should know?” he pressed when she didn't answer right away. “Is it about Dune House?” he asked.

“No,” Suzie shook her head quickly. Jason should have been the one to inherit Dune House, but his father had left it to Suzie instead. Although Jason seemed to be fine with that, she sometimes wondered if he really was. “Nothing is wrong with the house. Just a silly suspicion I have,” she shrugged mildly. “I'll let you know if it turns into something more.”

Mary frowned as she glanced at Suzie. Jason looked over at Mary and stared at her for a long moment before looking back at Suzie.

“You do that,” he said firmly. “I don't want either of you getting into trouble, if you need anything, just ask me, okay?” he looked at

the two of them but his eyes came to rest on Suzie. He had a powerful gaze, it was one of the first things she had noticed about him, as it reminded her of the few times when as a child she had met his father.

“We will,” Suzie nodded, but she had no intention of asking for his help.

As they left the police station Mary spoke in a hushed voice. “Why didn't you tell him about Al and George, Suzie?” she asked. “He might have been able to help us.”

“Mary, Jason is a wonderful man, and he is a wonderful police officer,” Suzie said as they reached the car. “But he is still just that, a police officer. If you want to get to the bottom of things, sometimes you have to leave the law out of it. If I told him about Al and George he'd want to have someone watching Dune House, and he'd want to know about the map. If I gave him the map, we'd never be able to find out where it led.”

“But maybe he'd want to search with us,” Mary pointed out with a frown as she climbed into the car.

“Maybe,” Suzie said and started the engine. “But, maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he would feel obligated to turn the information over, and then we would be left without our adventure, and without the proof we need to show that Alexandria didn't kill herself.”

“We still don't know that to be the case,” Mary reminded Suzie as Suzie pulled out of the parking lot of the police station and began driving down the road.

“Exactly,” Suzie said glumly. “And how long do you think Al and George would get for asking for a room at Dune House?” Suzie pointed out. “They haven't actually done anything wrong.”

“That's true,” Mary said softly. “Nothing we can prove anyway.”

“The first thing we need to do is find a way to show that Alexandria didn't jump, and the best way to get that information is to see Dr. Rose,” Suzie said with confidence.

“Dr. Rose? The medical examiner?” Mary asked with surprise. “I doubt she worked the case, she's so young herself.”

“No, probably not, but she'll have access to the records,” Suzie said as she drove toward the county morgue.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

Mary shivered slightly as Suzie parked outside the county morgue. Mary had an aversion to morgues. The morgue had recently moved from the basement of the police station to a new building on the outskirts of town.

“Let's go have a chat, hmm?” Suzie said as she opened the car door.

“First you want me to go to prison, now this,” Mary said with a shake of her head. “I'm starting to think you're a bad influence, Suzie.”

“You're just realizing that now?” Suzie grinned at her friend and they walked toward the morgue. It was very quiet, without even a receptionist behind the desk.

“Hello?” Suzie called out, but not too loudly. It seemed wrong to shout in such a quiet place.

“Listen,” Mary said. “I can hear music.”

Suzie listened and heard the faint music coming from behind the double doors that led to the examining room.

“Hello?” Suzie called out again as she walked toward the doors. “Dr. Rose, are you here?” she asked.

Suzie could hear the music more clearly when she pushed open the double doors, but she still didn't see Dr. Rose. The lights were bright in the examination room. There were a few empty gurneys in the center of the room. Suzie was relieved that they were empty.

“Is she in there?” Mary asked from outside the doors. “Is anyone in there?” she added with more fear in her voice.

“It doesn't look like anyone is,” Suzie said with a frown. “Hello? Dr. Rose?” she called out loudly.

Suddenly a door at the other end of the examination room swung open, and what stepped through was more than a little

startling. A figure with a plastic covering over its face and head-to-toe coveralls. The figure froze in the doorway as the music flooded the room.

“Suzie?” a female voice asked as she lifted the plastic covering up above her head. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” Suzie said with relief in her voice when she recognized Dr. Rose. “I'm sorry I know I probably shouldn't be back here, but we didn't see anyone and…”

“I told the receptionist to take the day off,” Dr. Rose said with a wave of her hand. “I only had one exam to do, and she had some damage from that storm yesterday. What can I help you with?” she asked as she tugged her gloves off and tossed them in a bio-hazard trash can. Suzie gulped as she realized that Dr. Rose was likely conducting an autopsy in the next room. “Sorry about the music,” she added. “It helps me stay focused.”

“Oh, it's fine,” Suzie nodded with a faint smile. “I'm sorry to bother you. I was just wondering if I could ask you a few questions.”

“About what?” Dr. Rose asked as she gestured to the double doors. “Why don't we talk up front?” she suggested.

“Yes,” Suzie nodded and pushed the door open for Dr. Rose. Her dark blonde hair was pulled back into a tight bun at the back of her head and covered by a hair net. From previous experience Suzie knew that Dr. Rose took her job very seriously. She wondered if she'd be willing to part with any information about Alexandria's death.

Mary was still standing nervously outside the doors. She had her hands clasped together in front of her, and Suzie could see that she was uncomfortable.

“Hi Mary,” Dr. Rose said with a smile. “Good to see you.”

“You too,” Mary replied and tried to ignore the faint splattering of blood on Dr. Rose's coveralls.

“So, what questions do you have?” Dr. Rose asked as she paused beside the front desk.

“Well, we recently purchased a painting by a local artist, Alexandria Black,” Suzie explained. “We'd just like to know a little bit more about how she passed.”

“Why?” Dr. Rose asked with a slightly furrowed brow. “Was she a friend?”

“Not exactly,” Suzie frowned. “But her painting is very

intriguing, and we thought it would be a story that we could share with our guests."

"Well, I don't know how good a story it would be," Dr. Rose shook her head. "Alexandria Black killed herself, I believe," she frowned as if she was trying to remember.

"That was the original finding," Suzie said cautiously. "But is there any possibility that could be a mistake?" she asked.

Dr. Rose's eyes flashed with interest. She leaned over the computer, careful not to touch anything with her coveralls.

"Let me take a look here," she murmured. "Hmm, there doesn't seem to be a digital record. Must have been before the conversion."

"Oh well," Mary said with a frown. "I guess we should just go then," she gave Suzie's arm a little tug.

"No, we can just do this the old fashioned way," Dr. Rose said. "Alexandria Black, yes, I read about this case," Dr. Rose said as she glanced over at her filing cabinet. "I was still a student when this happened, but it was one of the cases I was given to study since it was so simple," she reached into the filing cabinet and pulled out one of the files. "Alexandria Black, suicide," she scanned the document. "Nothing unusual," she said with a slight shrug.

"And there was never a question that it was a suicide?" Suzie pressed with disbelief. "Even though she hadn't shown signs of depression?"

"Most people don't show signs of depression," Dr. Rose said with a frown. "I've rarely seen a suicide case where the family wasn't shocked. No one expects anyone to take their own life," she added.

"But still, there weren't any unusual cuts or bruising?" Suzie asked insistently.

"Well, of course there were many bruises and cuts, she landed on the rocks below," Dr. Rose explained. "But nothing that was suspicious." Dr. Rose looked up at her curiously. "Do you have reason to think it was?"

"I just have a little hunch," Suzie replied in an innocent tone. "It just seems so odd to me."

"As I said before, no one really expects it," Dr. Rose replied with a mild shrug.

"But there were no strange marks, nothing at all?" Suzie continued, she had hoped that there would be something in the file that revealed the truth, or what she believed to be the truth.

Mary was trying to get a look at the file itself when Dr. Rose

closed the file with a swift snap.

“To be honest there was one thing that I was a little unsettled by when I reviewed the case in class,” she said softly. “I dismissed it at the time because my teacher didn't seem to think it was of any interest.”

“What was it?” Mary asked, and Suzie looked at Dr. Rose eagerly.

“Not to be too graphic,” Dr. Rose warned, “but in most suicides that are jumpers, the person lands with the body toward the ground,” she explained. “Alexandria was found face up in the water. It was assumed that she had flipped over as she fell, which is a little unusual from that height, she didn't have much time between leaving the cliff, and hitting the rocks and water to do a full somersault.”

“So, then it's possible that someone pushed her?” Suzie asked her eyes wide.

“Not really,” Dr. Rose explained. “When someone is pushed, there's usually evidence of it. Either there will be scuffing in the dirt or sand above the cliff, or the person who is pushed will have some torn clothing. Sometimes they are found in a defensive position, like with their hands over their face to shield themselves. Jumpers don't often do that. They know they are falling.”

“Alexandria displayed none of that?” Mary asked with a frown.

“No, she didn't have any defensive wounds, the only tearing in her clothing was consistent with her falling, and there were no scuff marks on the cliff. She seemed to have just jumped right off the edge, with no hesitation,” she pursed her lips briefly before putting the file back into the filing cabinet. “A very sad case.”

“Thank you for your help,” Suzie said quietly. “Did you know Alexandria?”

“No, I didn't,” Dr. Rose shook her head. “I went to school in the next town over, they just used her case file in my class. I was hired here right out of school, and have been here ever since. I have heard a few stories about Alexandria and seen some of her artwork around town. She was very talented.”

“I think so, too,” Suzie agreed. “I just wish I could understand what really happened to her.”

“You still don't think it was a suicide?” Dr. Rose asked skeptically.

“No,” Suzie answered honestly. “I don't.”

“Hmm, well if you discover anything, let me know,” Dr. Rose nodded. “I'll help you anyway I can.”

“Thanks,” Suzie said as she and Mary walked toward the door.

“If you see Jason before I do tell him I said hello,” Dr. Rose added just as Suzie was opening the door.

“Absolutely,” Suzie agreed and stepped the rest of the way out the door.

“Looks like you might not be the only Allen headed for romance,” Mary teased as they reached the car.

“That's it!” Suzie declared with humor in her sharp voice. “No more romances for you. I forbid it!”

“I can read what I please,” Mary said with a playful huff. As they drove away from the morgue, Mary spoke softly. “Do you really think it was murder?”

“I do,” Suzie said with a sigh. “I can't explain exactly why, but I do.”

“Well, in that case we need to be very careful. If Al and George were involved in one murder, they likely wouldn't be opposed to being involved in another.”

Mary's words hung heavy in the car. When they pulled up to the docks, Suzie sighed as she put the car in park.

“Puts a little damper on our adventure, doesn't it?” she asked.

“Just a little,” Mary agreed. “Why don't you wait here for Paul while I go grab the map?” she suggested. Suzie knew it was a ruse to give her some alone time with Paul, but she didn't complain. She wanted to sort through her thoughts a bit before they embarked on their journey.

“Sounds good,” she agreed and handed the keys over.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

Suzie stepped out onto the dock. There wasn't a trace of the storm from the day before. The water was calm. She stood on the dock and looked out at the water. The beautiful sky that spread out before her was not a reflection of what she was feeling inside. The only thing she was looking forward to about the trip was seeing Paul again. Her heart fluttered a little with the thought of it. She didn't have long to wait as his car pulled up a few minutes later.

“Hi Suzie,” he smiled at her as he walked up the docks. But his smile faded when he saw her expression. “Are you doing okay? The weather is clear if that's what you're worried about,” he added.

For just a minute she considered telling him what she had experienced, and her theory about Al and George. But as she stared into his gray gaze, she found herself worried about what he would think of her suspicions. Would he think she was creating wild ideas?

“I'm okay,” she finally responded. “I just hope that we're able to find something today.”

“We might just find it, with this,” Mary said as she hurried up to them with the map in her hand.

“Are you ready for this?” Mary asked as she looked over at Suzie.

Paul was still studying Suzie curiously. Suzie got the feeling that he did not believe what she had said.

“I think so,” Suzie sighed as she straightened the collar of her blouse. “Are you?” she asked with some concern.

“If it means finding the truth about Alexandria, then I'm more than ready,” Mary said with confidence.

“What do you mean the truth about Alexandria?” Paul asked quizzically as he led them on to his boat.

“Never mind,” Suzie waved her hand. “Let's just see where the day leads.”

Paul nodded and started the engine of the boat. The water lapped at the boat, rocking it softly. Paul was carefully steering it through the water, but the weather was clear, and the sky did not have a cloud in sight. The memory of her dream flooded Suzie's mind. As she waited for the moment of fear to pass, Suzie clutched tightly to the metal railing that lined the boat. She glanced over at Mary, who seemed to have forgotten about her aversion to boats. She had her face upturned to the wind. Her lips were spread wide with a smile. Suzie admired that carefree expression. It was not what she expected from Mary considering her previous fear of boats. Now she seemed very relaxed and comfortable. It seemed to Suzie that Mary had become more trusting of Paul than even she was.

“Are you ladies doing okay?” Paul called back over his shoulder.

“Wonderful,” Mary replied, her face still turned into the wind.

Suzie couldn't bring herself to speak, she was afraid anything she said might sound foolish.

“Suzie?” Paul asked and looked over at her with growing concern. “Are you all right?”

“Sure, I'm fine,” she replied her voice wavering slightly.

“You don't seem fine, you don't seem like yourself at all,” Paul said with a frown. “Come over here and join me,” he suggested as he looked out across the water again. The boat was skimming the coast as he headed for the inlet he thought the map indicated. Suzie took a deep breath and began to walk along the railing. When she passed by Mary, Mary gave her a light wink.

“It's going to be fine,” she whispered to Suzie, but Suzie was already lost in the sight of the water spreading out before her. It was both frightening and soothing which left her feeling quite confused.

“Here you go,” Paul said as he reached out and gently took her hand. Suzie glanced up at him when their hands touched and he smiled warmly at her. “I think you just need to see the water from my point of view,” he suggested.

“What do you mean?” Suzie asked as she stepped closer to him. He guided her right in front of him. Then he lifted her hands to the steering wheel of the boat. She felt the subtle vibration beneath her hands and looked out across the water. Paul's hands rested on her

wrists a moment longer, and then fell to the wheel on either side of her grasp.

“Look,” he murmured as he tilted his head toward the horizon. “Isn't it beautiful?”

Suzie found herself smiling as she looked out across the water. The view seemed to be endless, as the water eventually blended into the sky. It really was quite beautiful. There wasn't a wild tornado in sight. Suzie felt more in control standing at the helm, and she began to slowly relax. Despite the fact that she was feeling calmer, her heart was still racing. She knew that was only because Paul was standing so close.

“Is it far?” she asked over the sound of the engine.

“Not too much further,” Paul replied.

“Are you sure it's the right place?” Mary asked. She was still leaning against the railing with her face turned into the wind that the movement of the boat created.

“I would bet my boat on it,” Paul said with a glimmer of humor in his voice. “I know these parts pretty well, and that's one area that not too many people go to. If I was going to hide treasure, I'd hide it there.”

“Do you think it's treasure?” Suzie asked and narrowed her eyes. “I mean, it could be anything. We have no idea what we might find.”

“That's true,” Paul agreed as he steered the boat a little closer to the coastline. “But that's what makes things so interesting. Don't you think? The not knowing?” his voice brushed just beside Suzie's ear, causing her to be lulled by the rhythm of it.

Suzie glanced up at him, and locked her eyes briefly with Paul's. She studied him intently before looking away.

“I suppose it is,” she replied with a faint smile.

“Hold on, we might have a new mission,” Paul said with a grim frown as he spotted something in the water.

“What are you doing?” Suzie asked as Paul steered the boat away from the coast.

“There are some stranded boaters,” he explained as he peered out over the water. “We have to pick them up.”

“Oh wow, a real life water rescue,” Mary said with a grin. Suzie couldn't smile. She knew that Paul was doing the right thing, but it felt very wrong.

“I'm sure it won't be much of a rescue,” Paul explained as he

pointed to a small row boat in the middle of the water. “It's more likely to be a couple of tourists that weren't prepared for going out on the water. Sometimes they get too far from shore and can't find their way back.”

“Can you see who is in the boat?” Suzie asked nervously as she instinctively tucked the map under her shirt.

“Looks like two guys,” Paul said mildly. “Sorry for the interruption, but once we get them to shore we can go right back to our treasure hunt.”

“Oh, it's no problem,” Suzie assured him as Mary walked up to join them. Suzie was trying to get a look at who was on the boat.

“I hope they haven't been stranded for too long,” Mary said with a frown.

“Ahoy there!” Paul shouted as he drew close to the small boat. “Need a lift back to shore?” he offered.

The two men were wearing sweatshirts with hoods pulled forward enough to disguise their faces. But Suzie noticed that one was broad and big like a bear, while the other was skinny like a pole.

Suzie’s heart flipped. She opened her mouth to say something, but Paul had already pulled them on board.

“No, no,” she muttered as she backed away from the two men.

“Suzie, what's wrong?” Mary asked with concern when she noticed Suzie backing away.

“Thanks for the lift,” the tall, thin man, Al, said as he pulled back his hood to reveal the plain black baseball cap that he was wearing.

“We'll take it from here,” George said gruffly as he glared at Paul.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Paul asked his bushy eyebrows furrowing as he studied the two men.

“Paul, be careful,” Suzie hissed as her heart raced.

“Are these the two men?” Mary asked Suzie in a whisper.

“It means, that this boat and everything on it, now belongs to us,” George said sternly.

“Pirates?” Paul demanded as he moved between the two men and Suzie and Mary. “You boys are really out here playing pirates?”

“I'm sorry, I don't see any boys around here,” Al said and gritted his teeth. “But George does have a little friend,” he tilted his head toward George.

George held up a gun, and pointed it at each of them in turn. “No one has to get hurt,” he said roughly. “But this isn't a game.” Suzie instinctively looked at her cell phone that was on a bench next to Mary’s and Al must have noticed because he swiftly picked the phones up and threw them overboard.

Suzie felt Mary's fingernails digging into her arm as she clung to her. She knew that Mary was terrified. Suzie was pretty frightened herself. But Paul stood his ground, his hands in fists at his sides.

“This is ridiculous, there's nothing on this boat that you could possibly want,” he argued as he looked at the men. “I don't know what you two were planning but I think you must have your wires crossed, and are after the wrong boat.”

“Oh, we're on the right boat all right. Aren't we, Suzie?” Al asked as he looked over at her. “When we found out you bought that painting, we thought it would be simple. We'd rent a room and take the painting. But you ruined that, didn't you?” he asked.

Suzie was silent as she looked at the two men.

“So, now we're going to take what's ours,” George said and reached out for the steering wheel. “Where's the map?” he demanded.

“Suzie, do you know these men?” Paul asked, obviously trying to catch up.

“We don't have the map,” Suzie said sternly. “We're just out for a boating trip for the day. I don't know what map you could possibly be talking about.”

Al stared at her for a long moment. Then he took a step forward, still glaring at her with those cruel eyes.

“Oh, you know about the map, and I know this is no pleasure cruise, you're out here to find the money. But it's mine, not yours,” he said sharply.

“There is no map,” Suzie said through gritted teeth.

“Just keep going where you were heading, Captain,” George said sternly. “No need for chit chat.”

Paul met Suzie's eyes briefly and then turned back to look out over the water. He started the boat once more and began steering it in the same direction.

Mary and Suzie stood close together at the back of the boat. Suzie's stomach was churning with guilt. She wondered if she had told Paul about the two men, if he would have hesitated before picking up the stranded boaters. Maybe if she had just been honest

she could have prevented the situation. Now, everyone was in danger and she couldn't help but feel it was all because of her. It wasn't long before Paul cut the engine on the boat. They were beside a small dock that jutted out from a private beach.

“This is it,” he said quietly.

“Out, everybody,” Al snapped and pointed to the dock. “One at a time, and no funny business,” he warned. “We are armed.”

Mary shuddered as she grasped Suzie's hand and squeezed it. Suzie tried to give her a look of reassurance but she was sure there was terror in her eyes. Carefully Suzie climbed up onto the dock. She turned back to help Mary onto the dock behind her. Paul climbed up after them followed swiftly by Al and George.

“Keep moving,” Al said with a growl. “If you don't take us where we want to go you're going to pay the price,” he promised them all.

“Look there's no need for this,” Paul said gruffly as he turned to face the two men. “Why don't you just let the ladies go, and we'll handle this like men.”

“Oh, you want to handle this?” George asked as he waved a gun in Paul's direction. The sight of the weapon was enough to silence Paul, who swallowed thickly and turned to begin walking once more. George hung back to walk behind them while Al walked beside Paul.

Suzie walked across the sand, attempting to keep her legs from buckling. Just knowing that George was walking behind her with a gun in his hand was enough to make her weak with fear. She knew she had to be strong, not just for herself but for Mary and Paul, but her heart was pounding so hard she was sure it would burst.

“Here,” Paul said roughly as he suddenly stopped on the sand. “It's close to here.”

“Where is it exactly?” Al demanded as he glared at Paul.

“I'm not going to tell you that,” Paul said bravely as he turned to face them.

“Are you crazy?” Al demanded and signaled to George to step closer to him. “If you don't, George is going to make you wish you never woke up this morning,” Al warned.

“I'm not going to tell you until you guarantee me that Suzie and Mary will be safe,” he finished with certainty. “I'm not going to take you the rest of the way unless I know that they are not going to be harmed.”

“Do you really think we're going to let them go?” Al asked as he

stepped closer to Paul. “You're nuts. I know that the only reason you're being so compliant is because they are here.”

“Then we're at an impasse, because I'm not taking another step until they're safe,” he said sternly and folded his arms across his chest. Suzie stared at him with amazement, that he could be so brave in their situation, but her stomach was in knots as she anticipated what might happen.

“Tell you what,” Al said thoughtfully. “I'll let one of them go, just to be nice,” he smirked as he looked at Paul.

Paul glanced over at Suzie and Mary. Suzie could see the fear in his eyes.

“Just one,” Al reminded him. “For your complete cooperation. Understand?” he asked.

“Yes,” Paul breathed out.

Mary tightened her grasp on Suzie's hand. Suzie tried not to show any fear as Al began walking toward them.

“All right, the blonde can go,” Al said with a shrug. Mary let go of Suzie's hand. Suzie stared at Al with pure animosity.

“I'm not going anywhere,” she said sternly. “Mary should go.”

“You don't get to decide,” Al snapped and drew back his hand as if he might strike her. “This is not up for a vote. You’re going. You, I don't trust,” he narrowed his eyes at her.

“Mary has a health condition,” Suzie said quickly, her heart racing. She couldn't leave Mary behind. She had two children, she had many people that depended on her. Suzie on the other hand, didn't think too many people would miss her. “If she's without her medicine much longer, she'll pass out, and you'll have to carry her…”

“All right, all right,” Al snapped.

“Suzie, no,” Mary hissed and grabbed her hand again. She clung to it tightly. “I can't leave you here like this.”

“You have to,” Suzie said sternly and pulled her hand away. “You know what to do, Mary,” she locked eyes with her friend and held her gaze intently. “You know what to do,” she repeated.

Mary was trembling as she walked off across the sand. Suzie wasn't even sure if Mary knew how to get back to the populated area of the beach. She could only hope that she would.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

Suzie’s eyes were following Mary until she walked out of sight.

“There now, let's get moving,” Al said and gave Suzie a little push to her back.

“Watch it,” Paul warned.

“Shut your mouth,” George ordered and kicked some sand in Paul's direction.

Paul met Suzie's eyes for a moment, and then began walking in the direction of the location he thought the map identified. Suzie tried to concentrate on what lay ahead of her, but her mind kept returning to Mary. She was worried she would get lost.

“It's right down here,” Paul said as he began scaling down along the rocky side of a cliff.

“Where are you going?” Al demanded. “Are you trying to make us fall?”

“Look, this is the only way to get to the inlet,” Paul said sternly.

“Fine,” Al said impatiently.

“Careful, Suzie,” Paul said as he reached up to help guide her down the face of the rocks.

Suzie did her best to keep her footing but Paul's hand against her back kept her from slipping when she missed one of the rocks that she was climbing down. When they reached the sandy ground below, she found herself gazing into Paul's gray eyes. They were normally cool and impassive, but in that moment they were full of heat. She wasn't sure if it was because of the situation they were in, or because they were so close. She didn't have the chance to find out.

“So, where is it?” Al demanded as he stomped through the sand. “All I see is more sand!”

“It's here,” Paul said patiently. “Just around that bend,” he

pointed to another outcropping of rocks.

“You better not be playing any tricks on me,” Al warned. “I'm in no mood for it. I've waited long enough for what is rightfully mine.”

Paul looked uneasy as he took Suzie's hand in his and began to lead her along the sand and around the rocks. When they reached the other side there was a long thin inlet of water that was impossible to see from the rocks above. It wound in a lazy pattern from the water's edge.

“This is it?” George asked skeptically. “Are you sure?”

“No, I'm not sure,” Paul replied honestly. “I just thought this might be the place, and we were coming to check it out. I have no idea if I was right about it or not.”

“Well, what next?” Al asked with a frown. “Where's the map?”

Paul was silent as Al glared at him. Then Al turned his demanding gaze on Suzie.

“Where's the map?” he asked again, with fury rising in his voice.

“I said I didn't have a map…” she began to say, but he snapped his hand directly in front of her face, making her jump with fear.

“Give me the map, or I will take it from you,” he warned her.

“Suzie,” Paul growled and tightened his grasp on her hand. “Just give it to him,” he insisted.

Suzie frowned as she knew that the moment she gave the map to Al, she was going to be useless to him. She presumed that at least they would want to keep Paul alive because they would want to use his boat to transport the money.

There was pleading in Paul's eyes, as if he was silently asking her to trust him. She had never been one to trust easily, considering the things she had witnessed in her life. But there was something about Paul that made her instinctively certain that he had her best interests at heart. Reluctantly, Suzie pulled the map out from under her shirt. In a trembling hand she passed it over to Al.

“Here it is, finally,” Al said with joy in his voice. “You're much wiser than Alexandria,” he said with a slight shake of his head. “If she would have just given us this map years ago, none of us would be in this mess.”

“You didn't have to kill her,” Suzie suddenly stated. “She was barely more than a child.”

“It was an accident,” George said quietly.

“Shut up, George!” Al shouted. “You don't want to give them more ammunition. Just keep your mouth shut.”

“I'm sure it was no accident when you shoved her off that cliff,” Suzie challenged, her attention now focusing on George.

“Suzie,” Paul breathed her name as a warning and she felt his grip tighten on her hand. But it was too late for Suzie to turn back. If she was going to die, she was going to at least find out the truth.

“First you threw Darren under a bus. You claimed it was his plan, but it never was, was it?” she demanded. “You let him take the fall, because you wanted to get to that money before he could.”

Al was looking over the map intently. “This is gibberish,” he complained. “It doesn't make any sense.”

George was still staring straight into Suzie's eyes. It was clear that he was eager to confess to his transgressions.

“Darren was just a kid, he didn't need all that money,” he muttered. “Besides Al and I did all the work. All he did was drive the getaway car. When everything was going down he told us his wife knew some places that she could stash the cash. So we let him give it to her. But he was only living in Garber for a short time and he never knew exactly where the money was. Said his wife had left a map hidden for him so if something happened to her before he was released he would be able to find the money. But he wouldn’t tell us where the map was, he just said that he knew the money was buried near the cliffs in Garber but nothing more.”

“Because he knew,” Suzie said with confidence. “He knew that you two would try to con him out of his share, so the location was known by the only person he ever trusted, his young wife, who you hunted down and murdered…”

“No!” George fumed as Al looked up from the map. “It was an accident!” he insisted. “I went to grab her and…”

“George!” Al spat his name out and glared at him. “Shut up already! You don't have to answer to her! She's nobody!”

“But you do have to answer to Alexandria, don't you?” Suzie pressed as Paul observed, his lips half-open with shock at the way she was interrogating George. “And Darren, who was killed in prison because you two pinned the crime on him and he served more time. Now, you think you deserve the money you stole and murdered for?”

“All I did was reach for her,” George admitted, Suzie was surprised to see tears in his eyes. “She was running from me, she was scared. I reached for her, I wasn't going to hurt her, but she lunged out of my way and went right over the side of the cliff,” his

eyes widened in horror as if he was reliving the moment. “I didn't push her,” he breathed out, his voice trembling. “I didn't even touch her.”

“And that absolves you?” Suzie asked, her voice softer but filled with hatred. “Did you see the shock in her eyes when she was falling, George? Was that worth the money that never even belonged to you?”

“I,” George swallowed thickly and closed his eyes. That was the moment that Suzie had been waiting for. The moment he closed his eyes, Suzie lunged forward and released Paul's hand. She shoved her full body weight against George, which wasn't much considering he was built like a mountain, and at the same time grabbed the barrel of the gun he was holding. The surprise he experienced at the sudden blow was exactly what Suzie had been hoping for. He released his grasp on the gun for just a split-second, but it was long enough for Suzie to wrench it from his hand.

“Hey!” Al shouted when he saw what was happening. He tucked the map into his pocket as he lunged for Suzie. Paul was already in the middle of the fray as he tried to deflect Al from grasping Suzie's arm. The four engaged in a tangle of fists, shouts, and grunts as they struggled over the weapon. Suzie's heart was pounding, and each beat sounded like a gunshot in her ears. She knew that the trigger could be pulled at any moment. She knew that she might have made her final mistake. When she broke free of George she still had the gun in her hand. She raised it as she backed away from the men. She pointed it in the direction of George and Al. Al had his arm slung around Paul's neck and was squeezing.

“Let him go!” she demanded in the strongest voice she could muster.

“Drop the gun,” Al challenged, his eyes as hard as granite. “Or I slice his throat.”

Only then did Suzie see the small blade in Al's hand. He had it pressed against the side of Paul's throat. Her heart immediately sunk. She knew the moment she dropped the gun it would likely be retrieved and used against her. It was not a risk she could take. But she also couldn't let Paul get hurt because of her reckless move. She stared into Paul's eyes, and though she knew he had to be terrified, he offered her a small smile of reassurance.

“It's okay, Suzie, shoot the scumbag,” he said in a clear even tone.

Suzie raised the gun and pointed it right at Al's head. Her hand was shaking, but her finger was on the trigger.

“Drop the knife and let him go,” she said in a stern voice.

“Like you're going to let him die,” Al chuckled. “Do you think he really wants to die for you?” he asked.

“Are you going to let him die for you?” Suzie suddenly asked and then pointed the gun directly at George.

“Drop it!” Al shouted in a panic. Suzie had noticed that Al was protective of George and tolerant of him even when he made mistakes. She presumed that their bond had to be strong for Al to put up with him and want to share the money with him.

“Let him go,” Suzie said, struggling to keep the fear out of her voice. “Let Paul go, and I'll drop the gun.”

“Or you'll shoot us both,” Al shouted back, obviously beginning to unravel.

“I'm not a murderer,” Suzie said calmly. “I'm not going to kill anyone.”

“Sure,” Al spat back. “George, get the gun from her. She's not going to kill anyone, right?” he said and glanced over at George.

Paul seized the moment to grab the hand that was holding the blade at his throat. He pulled at it hard, and Al's skinny frame was no match for Paul's powerful muscles. He tugged hard and flung Al over his shoulder twisting his body to encourage the tumble. Al landed hard on the ground and the blade was knocked right out of his hand.

Suzie scrambled for the blade, and in the process, George grabbed hold of her from behind. He wrenched the gun from her hand, twisting her wrist backward so far that a cry of pain escaped from her lips. He fired off a warning shot straight up into the air.

“Stop all of this now!” he demanded. He pointed the gun directly at Suzie. “Pick up the blade, Al,” he said calmly as he glared at Paul daring him to make a move.

Suzie felt her heart sink as she realized that their only chance to escape had just been wasted. George released the safety as he continued to point the gun at Suzie.

“Shoot her,” Al snapped as he brushed sand off his clothes. “We have the map now, we don't need her. We've still got him to operate the boat.”

“No!” Paul shouted abruptly and lunged toward Suzie. Suzie was frozen where she stood as the sound of the safety being released

had made the fact that she was staring down the barrel of a loaded gun quite real.

“Don't,” George warned as he swung the gun toward Paul and then pointed it right back at Suzie again. “I'm not shooting anybody,” he said firmly. “Everyone just calm down, you too, Al.”

“Don't tell me to calm down…” Al began to shout.

“This is how it happened last time,” George argued. “You promised me no one would have to die this time. Now, as long as they do as they're asked, they shouldn't have to die.”

Al rolled his eyes and waved his hand dismissively. “Whatever you say, George. Let's just get the cash and get moving before that gunshot gets the attention of the local cops.”

“All right, all right,” George nodded and gestured with the gun toward Paul. “Move it, take us to the cash before I let Al call the shots again.”

Paul lowered his eyes and reached for Suzie's hand, but George shoved his hand away before Paul could grasp it. “No more touchy feely,” he insisted. “Just keep walking.”

Paul glanced up at Suzie briefly, and Suzie saw the pain in his eyes. She knew then that he was sure they were not going to get away. He turned and began walking across the sand.

“There's a small cavern inside the rocks,” Paul explained quietly as they reached another outcropping of rocks. “It's just about there,” he said as he pointed to a small opening in the rocks.

“Just about?” Al growled. “Show me exactly where,” he demanded. “You, keep that gun on her, if he tries anything, pull the trigger!” he ordered George.

George pointed the gun at Suzie again and Suzie felt a shiver climb along her spine. His eyes were just as cruel as they had been when she had first met him.

Paul spared one more glance in her direction before following Al's command and walking carefully up to the opening in the rocks. He tugged at the cluster of rocks pulling the larger ones free and knocking the smaller ones loose to tumble down along the cliff face. Soon a cavern about the size of a small oven was revealed.

“Is it in there?” Al asked with excitement as he leaned toward the opening.

“I can't tell, it's too dark,” Paul said as he peered inside as well.

Al pulled a flashlight from his pocket and shone it inside the cavern. “I think there’s something at the back. It looks like a piece

of wood sticking straight up. I think it has a star drawn on it," he said in a whisper. He stood back up and pulled out the treasure map from his pocket. He looked at the map. "The star looks exactly like this one," he said as he pointed to a big star drawn at the top of the treasure map. "I bet you the money is buried under it. I am going to have to crawl in," he paused a moment and then shook his head.

"No, you," he pointed to Suzie. "Get inside there and start digging."

Suzie hesitated. She didn't like enclosed spaces. She also didn't like a gun being pointed at her.

"Now!" Al barked.

Suzie moved carefully toward the opening. She could feel Paul's watchful eyes on her.

"Watch it, there are some sharp edges," Paul warned her.

"Quiet," Al snapped. George turned the gun on Paul to keep him quiet.

"I can't get to the back," Suzie said, her voice muffled as she was half-way inside the opening. The truth was she could easily get all the way in. But she knew the moment the money was in Al's hands they had nothing to keep them alive.

"Go in more," Al said and gave her backside a shove.

"Don't!" Paul started to say but George stuck the gun right in his face to quiet him.

"Ouch," Suzie moaned loudly. "I think I'm stuck!"

"Are you serious?" Al demanded and stomped his feet in the sand. "This is insane! Get inside, get to the back!" he shouted again.

"I can't," Suzie insisted and wiggled her legs a little. "I'm completely stuck! You're going to have to pull me out."

Al looked up at the sky and let out a string of curses. "Unbelievable," he finally sighed. "We'll just have to get some of these other rocks out of the way."

He began tugging at the rocks surrounding Suzie. Suzie knew that if he figured out she wasn't actually stuck, he was going to be enraged. She did her best to pretend she was trying to get free.

"Get over here and help!" Al demanded. George lowered the gun and walked over to Al to help him pull out the rocks. "Not you," Al growled. "Him!"

Paul walked up on the other side of Al.

"Are you okay, Suzie?" he asked with concern.

Al interrupted before Suzie could answer. "Listen to me, pal, if

we don't get her out of here, I'll take her out piece by piece! So, stop talking and start pulling!"

Paul tugged at the rocks around Suzie's body. She felt his fingers run along her hips, where she was pretending to be wedged. She knew he knew that she wasn't really stuck.

"Maybe we should just think about this for a moment," Paul suggested. "If we get some wet sand, maybe we can pack it around her and…"

"Drop the weapon!" a voice boomed above them. Suzie tensed as she heard the voice. She had no idea who it was, because the rocks muffled the sound of it. She wondered if it could be another criminal there to find the cash.

"Down on your knees!" the voice shouted.

Suzie heard a gunshot, and immediately cried out. "Paul? Paul, are you okay?" she asked as she struggled to back out of the hole she had crawled into.

"Suzie, don't move!" she heard Paul say, but she couldn't be sure if he was hurt or not, she couldn't hear or see anything and she was beginning to panic.

"Paul?" she called out again, though she kept still. "Paul?" she gasped.

"It's okay, Suzie, it's okay," Paul said. "Just be as still as you can, okay? Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, yes," she said quickly, relieved to hear him speak again.

"When they pulled out the other rocks they shifted the weight of the rocks above you," Paul explained as calmly as he could. "So, if you move too much, they might come down on top of you."

"Paul? Who's there? Who shot the gun?" she asked quickly as the danger of her situation began to fully sink in.

"It's me, Jason," she heard the other voice say. "It's okay, Suzie, I've got Al and George in handcuffs. Just be still while we figure out how to get you out of there."

"Okay," Suzie said and tried to hold back the tears that were forming. She felt something sliding in along her back.

"We're putting a wedge in, so that we can make sure the rocks will stay in place," Paul explained. She felt his hand come to rest on her hip. She knew he was just trying to reassure her, and the warmth, the connection, was exactly what she needed to relax and focus on what needed to be done. "Okay, when I say go, I want you to try to move, just a little bit at a time, okay?"

“Okay,” Suzie replied and cringed.

“Go!” Paul said. Suzie started to back out, but she was startled when four strong hands seized her on either side of her hips. She was tugged out within the span of a second, and the rocks that had been above her came collapsing down to fill the empty space she had been occupying. Suzie gasped with fear as she stumbled backward and right into Paul's arms. He held her close as he felt her shaking.

“It's okay, you're safe,” he murmured and smoothed a hand down through her hair. Suzie's mind was spinning with the remainder of panic, as well as the strange sensation of being engulfed by Paul's strong arms.

“Oh, Suzie, are you okay?” Mary asked as she ran up to her and hugged her tightly. She didn't care that she was sandwiching Suzie between herself and Paul. “I'm sorry, I moved as fast as I could, and I was so scared that I would be too late.”

“You were right on time, Mary,” Suzie promised her. “You did good,” she added as Mary released her, and Paul did as well.

“Are you hurt?” he asked as he looked into her eyes.

“No, I think I'm okay,” Suzie replied and glanced over at the two men cuffed and sitting in the sand.

“They're facing kidnapping and attempted murder,” Jason said quickly. “They're not going to be able to bother you anymore.”

“You can add murder to that list,” Suzie said boldly as she glared at the two men. “They're responsible for Alexandria Black's death, and I'll be happy to testify about what they told me.”

Jason raised his eyebrows, adjusted his hat, and turned to glare at the two men.

“There will be time for all of that later, Suzie,” Paul assured her. “Now, let's just get you home, hmm?”

Suzie nodded as she suddenly felt exhausted. With everything that had unfolded her adrenaline had been pumping, and now she was ready to crash.

“Are you three okay to travel back on the boat?” Jason asked. “If not I can get a car for you.”

“It's fine with me,” Suzie murmured. “Are you up for it, Mary?” she asked.

“After today I think I'd rather be on a boat than on the beach,” Mary laughed nervously.

“I'll get them home safe,” Paul assured Jason. As they began to

walk back toward the boat, Suzie paused and glanced over her shoulder.

“Jason, what about the money?” she asked.

“Well, if it's in there, we'll find it,” Jason said with confidence. “I can get somebody out here to dig it up.”

“See boys?” Suzie said as she glanced at the two men sitting in the sand. “That money never did, and never will belong to you.”

Al snarled but a glare of warning from Jason silenced him. George was just staring at the sand desolately.

When they reached the boat, Paul helped Mary and then Suzie on board. As soon as the boat launched, Mary turned toward Suzie.

“Don't you ever do that to me again,” she said with fury in her eyes.

“What?” Suzie asked with surprise and no small amount of fear. Mary was rarely angry, but when she was, it was a good idea to take cover.

“You made me leave in your place. I would never have forgiven myself if something had happened to you,” Mary gulped out and hugged Suzie tightly. Suzie melted into the hug and hugged her friend in return.

“The only thing that kept me sane was knowing that you were safe,” Suzie whispered. “I never had any doubt that you would find help.”

“That's not a good enough excuse,” Mary insisted and released Suzie. She took a step back and placed both of her hands on her hips. “You promise me that you will never ever do that to me again.”

Suzie couldn't help but laugh a little as she shook her head. “All right fine, Mary. If armed men ever abduct us again, you can stay behind next time.”

“Don't laugh, I'm serious,” Mary scoffed and crossed her arms.

“Ladies, why don't we plan on there being no more abductions, wouldn't that be better?” Paul asked rationally as he guided the boat across the water.

“Well, just in case,” Mary muttered and tried to hide a smile. She was beginning to realize how absurd her words sounded.

“Just in case,” Suzie agreed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

As the boat skimmed across the water the sun was beginning to set. Suzie's heart swelled at the peaceful slope of the sky against the sea. In her mind she pieced together the last moments of Alexandria's life. She had been running from Al and George. She had probably known that if they caught her, they would be able to force the truth out of her, and then all the prison time that Darren was doing would be pointless. Worse than that they might have even killed her. But George and Al had pursued her right up to the edge of the cliff.

Alexandria had turned back to see where they were, just as George lunged for her. She had jumped after all, but not because she wanted to die. She had jumped because she was trying to escape from George and Al and the torture they promised her. She had jumped because she was trying to protect her husband, even though he had failed to protect her.

Suzie sighed as she tried to comprehend how a young woman could be so blinded by love that she was prepared to bury the proceeds of a crime. She must have known that keeping a map of where the money was buried was a risk but it was obviously a risk she was prepared to take so Darren could find the buried money if something ever happened to her.

It truly was a sad story, but one that would finally have an ending. It might not be happy, but at least it was true. The money, once found, would be returned to its rightful owners and the two men who had caused her death, would be behind bars for a long time. She sighed as she felt the tension in her muscles begin to slowly unwind. By the time they arrived at the docks, she was feeling as if she was a million miles away from the frightening experience she had just survived. Mary was eager to get off the

boat, but Suzie lingered for a moment.

“Are you coming, Suzie?” Mary called over her shoulder. “Jason asked us to meet him at the station, remember?”

“I remember,” Suzie replied reluctantly. The sun was just beginning to sink lower in the sky and with its descent a myriad of pinks and deep oranges had sprouted across the blue expanse.

“You can stay, if you want,” Paul offered as he finished tying the boat to the dock. He glanced up at her, and Suzie caught his eye as she smiled.

“I'd like that,” she said quietly. “But what about Jason?”

“Don't worry about Jason,” Mary said knowingly. “I'll take care of him.”

“Thanks,” Suzie called out as Mary hurried off along the docks. Suzie got the feeling that Mary was happy to give her and Paul some alone time.

Paul rested his arms gently against the railing of the boat and smiled faintly at her. Suzie could feel his gaze skimming across her features but she was too nervous to look in his direction. It was the strangest thing for her. She had never been nervous with any man before. She couldn't understand why it was so difficult to even talk to Paul without her heart acting wild and her mind spinning. She felt more than a little foolish.

“Suzie,” he murmured, his voice drifting as seamlessly as the waves that rolled gently against the boat.

“Hmm?” Suzie inquired without looking in his direction.

“Suzie,” he repeated and rested his hand lightly along the curve of the back of her hand. “Am I making you uncomfortable?” he asked, his voice still soft. “Did you want to be alone?”

“No,” Suzie replied and forced herself to look into his clear gray eyes. “I'm sorry, Paul. I guess, I'm just a little,” she hesitated a moment and then admitted in a whisper. “Nervous.”

“Nervous?” his smile grew and for the first time she noticed the way his eyes lit up to a bluish shade when he was amused. “What's there to be nervous about?” he asked.

Suzie lowered her eyes and felt the heat rising in her cheeks. She took a slow deep breath and tried to convince herself that she was being silly, that they were just two friends enjoying the water and the view. When she felt his fingertips reach up to lightly trace along her cheek, and the gentle swoop of him tucking her hair back behind her ear, the warmth from his touch spread throughout her

body. She glanced over at him shyly.

“Is it this?” he asked and leaned a little closer to her, his lips puckered just slightly in anticipation of a kiss. Suzie only had a split-second to decide what she was going to do. All of her desire was to allow the kiss, but all of her instincts told her to be cautious. Just as his lips would have brushed hers, she tilted her head slightly to the side so that he grazed only the corner of her mouth. He lightly pecked her cheek, and then pulled away. Suzie glanced back up at him guiltily, expecting him to be hurt or even angry, but instead he was smiling whimsically at her.

“I'm sorry,” she murmured as she searched his eyes.

“I'm patient,” he replied with a wink before looking back out over the water. Something about his words left Suzie feeling even more comfortable with him than she had before. She laid her hand lightly over his and they continued to gaze out over the water.

There was a lot about Garber that was new for her, but the most surprising thing had to be the way that Paul made her feel. Awkward and silly, but so very content when she was beside him. She leaned a little closer to him, and he naturally draped his arm around her shoulder, pulling her gently against him. She offered a subtle sigh as she rested her head lightly against the crook of his shoulder. Across the scattered colors of the setting sun, a flock of birds flew. Suzie felt her spirit soar in time with their rise through the clouds. It was a moment she was certain she would treasure.

The End

OceanofPDF.com

TREASURED HISTORY

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 3

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

The wooden slats on the wraparound porch creaked mournfully as Suzie walked across them. There were still some repairs that needed to be made to the old house which was affectionately known as Dune House. Suzie and her best friend, Mary, had recently renovated the house so it could be run as a bed and breakfast once again. For just a moment Suzie wondered how many people had walked across those same wooden slats. She knew that her aunt, uncle, and their son, Jason, had lived in this house.

Her uncle was almost a total recluse when he died leaving the house to her. His life was shrouded with mystery as she had not known him very well. She had enjoyed getting to know her cousin, Jason, who was much younger than she was and a police officer for the fine, tiny town of Garber. Now the grand old home, a mansion compared to the other houses in town, belonged to Suzie. But what about all of the other lives that had passed through it? Suzie's questions were forgotten when she reached the small table with two chairs. Mary was gazing out over the water, her expression filled with longing. Suzie was fairly certain that she hadn't noticed her approach.

“I made us coffee,” Suzie said softly as she sat down across from her friend. Mary's auburn hair was loose and flowing around her shoulders. When the wind teased it, the streaks of gray nestled in the thick strands glistened in the sunlight. She had such a loving spirit in Suzie's opinion that it seemed to be reflected in her soft, kind features and culminated in her warm, brown eyes. Mary rarely had a cross word to say about anyone but she was always willing to listen to Suzie's rants about everyone and everything. The pair seemed to balance each other out as friends.

They were both in their fifties, but couldn't be more different if

they tried. Suzie's life had been filled with adventure and even a little danger. She dressed as fashionably as possible and did her best to keep up with technology and politics. Her hair was cut in a short and sassy style and was dyed a brassy gold that she felt took about ten years off her face. She was quick to judge and quicker to put someone in their place if she felt they were out of line. But Mary always had a way of calming her down.

Now that they were sharing their lives again on a daily basis there was a sense of completion within Suzie, as if she had been missing Mary all of these years. Meanwhile Mary had been raising her family, confiding her struggles with her husband only with Suzie, and playing the part of the happy wife and mother. Despite the fact that Suzie had been in harrowing situations with some dangerous people, she still believed that Mary was the stronger of the two for not planning her husband's demise long ago. That subtle strength rose to the surface the moment that Mary became aware of Suzie's presence.

“Oh Suzie, thank you,” Mary drew a smile to her lips. Suzie could tell that it took some effort to do so.

“Are you all right, hon?” Suzie asked as she set the coffee in front of Mary. Then she sat across from her. She was surprised to see Mary looking down-hearted considering that they had almost finished renovating the house and were ready for opening day tomorrow.

“I'm all right,” she replied with a wistful smile. “Just thinking about the past.”

“I know that you must be missing home,” Suzie offered gingerly. Suzie had never been terribly attached to any one place. She preferred to travel, and often did during her career as an investigative journalist. It wasn't until she had switched paths and become an interior decorator that she had settled in one place for any length of time. Mary on the other hand had married and stayed in the same home while she raised her children. She endured many years of neglect by her husband, and when her children went to college she had finally divorced. It had been a tumultuous time for her, and with Suzie inheriting Dune House the two friends had agreed to start a new life together. It hadn't been a huge change for Suzie, but for Mary it was a total change of pace.

“It's not home I'm missing,” Mary replied with a sigh. “I guess you can have empty nest syndrome wherever you are. I know the

kids are fine, they are adults now with their own lives. But, I still miss them."

Suzie had to bite her tongue. She had a secret that she was keeping from Mary, and she didn't want to ruin the surprise. She had never had children of her own, but she had kept in contact with Mary throughout her children's lives, and in many ways she felt a deep connection with them.

"I'm sorry, Mary, I know that must be hard," she reached out and gave her friend's hand a gentle squeeze.

"I'm sorry, I don't want to dampen the excitement," Mary said with a shake of her head and smiled brightly. "I'm looking forward to the opening. Is Paul going to be here for it?" she arched an eyebrow mischievously.

Suzie knew that Mary was changing the subject for her sake, and normally she would steer it right back and talk through her friend's feelings. But knowing what she did, she felt relief when the subject shifted.

"He said he will be, but with him going in and out on the boat, he can never be sure," Suzie shrugged a little. She tried not to blush. Paul was a local fisherman who she had met and formed a quick bond with. He had made it clear to her when he tried to kiss her for the first time that he was interested in more than friendship, but Suzie wasn't sure if she was ready to take that next step.

"I'm sure he'll be here," Mary said with confidence. "I wouldn't put it past him to swim if he needed to."

"Ha!" Suzie laughed. "He probably would," she smiled as she thought of Paul. He was a strong man with broad shoulders. His job was physically demanding at times, and it helped him stay fit well into his fifties. Suzie thought his gray eyes were a direct reflection of the open sea just before dawn, which was often when he would set out on his fishing trips. His face was weathered by the wind and the sun, which Suzie found incredibly attractive and interesting, as if it contained memories of his life that his mind might not even recall. She had an image of him swimming towards her across the roughest seas and smiled shyly. Suzie hadn't come to Dune House looking for romance. She thought that was in her past. But Paul seemed to be determined to make it part of her present.

"I can't believe we already have guests booked for the opening," Mary said with pride in her voice, bringing Suzie's thoughts back to reality. "I have a feeling this place is going to be quite successful."

“With this beauty surrounding it, how could it not be?” Suzie tipped her head towards the water that stretched out endlessly before them. Suzie had a few memories of visiting Dune House when she was very young. It had always seemed like paradise to her. To end up being a part of it, was an amazing thing for her.

The two friends fell into a comfortable silence as the waves rolled in. Suzie sipped her coffee while Mary slowly stirred hers. They had always been close enough to sit together without saying a word. Just as Mary lifted her mug to take a sip of her coffee, Suzie heard a beeping horn from the front of the house. Her eyes widened. She glanced at her watch. She hadn't realized how late it was.

“Who could that be?” Mary asked as she put down her mug of coffee.

“It must be our first guest,” Suzie said mischievously as she stood up from the table.

“What?” Mary asked with surprise. “We didn't have any guests that were supposed to arrive yet! I haven't even checked the rooms to make sure they are ready!”

Suzie tried not to laugh at her friend's panic. She felt a little guilty for not revealing the truth. But she had made a promise that she wouldn't.

“The rooms are perfect, Mary,” she assured her. “Let's go greet our first guest!” she said happily.

“Oh, all right,” Mary frowned. She was clearly not happy about the surprise guest. Suzie knew that would change in an instant. They walked around the porch to the front of Dune House. There was a taxi in the long driveway. A man was standing beside the taxi.

“Oh my!” Mary gasped as she set eyes on the man. “Oh, is it really you, Ben?” she cried out as she ran down the steps towards him. She ignored the aching in her knees as she threw her arms around her son and hugged him tightly. Suzie stood at the top of the steps that led up to the porch, grinning from ear to ear. She and Ben had planned the little surprise, but it had been Ben's idea.

“Oh, I've missed you, Mom!” Ben said and held her close. Not all men in their early twenties would be so affectionate, but Mary had doted on both of her children with such love and affection as they grew up that they were very loving in return. It brought a hint of tears to Suzie's eyes to see her friend so blissfully happy as the two

walked up the steps onto the porch.

“Catherine wanted to be here, too, but she had some classes she had to complete,” Ben paused and smiled at Suzie before looking back at his mother. “We just want you to know how proud we are that you and Suzie have done this. It's really great to see you so happy, Mom.”

“Happy?” she grinned. “I'm over the moon!” she hugged him again. “You have to tell me about everything. How is school going? Have you met any girls?”

Ben rolled his eyes and laughed. “Plenty of time for that, Mom. I'm going to stay for a couple of days after opening day. So, if you need any help with anything, I'm here to offer it!”

Suzie felt a sense of pride as she studied Ben. In many ways he was a reflection of his mother with auburn hair cut short and deep brown eyes, but he had the strong English features that belonged to his father of a slightly hooked nose and slender face. Ben had always been a good, young man, but he had some trouble during his teens. He was vying for his father's attention, which was not easily given. He had grown through that stage, and now he was a bright, young adult who she believed could accomplish anything.

“Suzie, you look fantastic,” Ben said as he opened his arms to her. Suzie hugged him warmly. “And so does this place,” he added as he ran his eyes over Dune House. The house rose majestically on the top of the sloping hill. Its turreted roof and dramatic windows made it look like something out of an old movie. The wraparound porch gave it a sense of being a home, but its sprawling size made it appear to be a mansion. With the sea as its backdrop there was no way to deny its beauty.

“Yes, we're pretty happy with it,” Suzie said with a modest smile. She couldn't imagine a more beautiful place to live. It had been a lot of work, but it was well worth the effort, and she had really enjoyed decorating each of the larger suites to reflect a different style or place.

“Mary, why don't you take him down to the beach?” Suzie suggested. She could tell her friend was still in shock from the surprise.

“Great idea,” she said. “Leave your shoes here, Benny, you won't need them,” she grinned.

Suzie watched the moment as the two walked out across the sand. They had such a similar gait, Mary's only weighted slightly by

the trouble she had with her knees. She smiled fondly to herself as her mind flicked through memories of Ben growing up, then she turned back towards the house. As Suzie stepped back into the house, she heard her cell phone ringing. She hurried over to where she had it charging on the kitchen counter. She was hoping that it would be Paul. She smiled when she saw his name on the caller ID.

“Good morning,” she said as she answered the phone.

“Good morning,” he replied warmly. “I was wondering if the surprise went smoothly?”

“It did,” Suzie replied giddily. “Mary is very happy to see him.”

Suzie had shared her plans with Paul. In fact they had been talking every day and seeing each other several times during the week. He had helped with the final touches to Dune House, and put her in contact with local tradesmen when she needed them.

“Well, it might be nice if they have a night to catch up,” Paul said in a casual way.

“Yes, I'll probably just hole up in my room tonight and let them have some space,” Suzie agreed. She knew that Mary and Ben might want to have that time to talk about some private issues regarding the divorce and Ben's future plans.

“Or you could join me for dinner,” Paul suggested slyly.

Suzie's heart skipped. She had been avoiding being alone with Paul. When he was over Mary was always with them. Since he had tried to kiss her and she had turned away offering only her cheek, she had been anxious about what it would be like the next time she was alone with him. It wasn't that she didn't want to kiss him, in fact she had been spending quite an embarrassing amount of time imagining what it would be like. She just wanted to know that she would be ready. Going to dinner together would mean that they would be alone. Could she handle it?

“That would be lovely,” Suzie began. “But…”

“Oh boy,” Paul sighed with a subtle laugh. “I understand,” he said before she could even give him an excuse. Suzie wondered how long he would tolerate her pushing him away. She didn't want to give him the impression that she didn't want to be with him.

“I was going to say, but I want to go to Cheney's,” she said swiftly. “I'm dying for some pasta.”

“Cheney's it is,” Paul said sounding pleased. “Around six?”

“I'll be ready,” Suzie promised. When she hung up the phone her mind was buzzing with excitement and uncertainty.

“That sounded promising,” Mary said as she walked into the kitchen.

“You heard me?” Suzie smiled shyly.

“I heard you trying to blow him off, again,” Mary pointed out with a grim smile. “But that last part, I liked.”

“I know, I know, I just feel so torn,” Suzie sighed.

“Trust me, Suzie,” Mary said with a distant look in her eyes. “The love of a man who truly cares for you is worth the risk.”

Suzie was surprised that Mary would say that after all she had been through. Her friend was always very wise, and knew just what to say in any given situation.

“We're going to dinner, I thought that would give you and Ben some time to catch up,” Suzie explained.

“It will be perfect,” Mary nodded. “We'll order in and I'll find out the truth about these girls I've been hearing about.”

“Girls?” Suzie laughed.

“Uh huh, seems to be more than one,” Mary grimaced.

“He's young, Mary, remember that,” Suzie chuckled.

“I know, he's getting settled in his room right now. I can't believe you two kept this from me!” Mary said with playful anger.

“I'm sorry. It really was his idea. He wanted to show you his support,” Suzie smiled. “You've raised a really amazing young man, Mary.”

“How did that happen?” Mary laughed and shook her head.

“I know just how it happened,” Suzie smiled proudly. “Now, help me figure out what to wear, hmm?”

“Sure,” Mary agreed. As they went through Suzie's closet it felt as if they were right back in high school. It didn't matter how many years had passed, in Suzie's mind she was as young and free as she was the day she had graduated. Giggling over outfits with Mary brought back all of the wonderful times she had spent with her friend. She felt very lucky to be sharing Dune House with her.

“All right, you have three to choose from,” Mary said with a final laugh. “I'm going to check over the rooms one last time to make sure everything is in place.”

“You've already checked three times,” Suzie laughed.

“I know, I know, but one last look won't hurt,” Mary grinned as she walked out of the room.

Suzie stood in front of a full length mirror. She looked at the rose-shaded dress that was her first choice for the evening. It was a

dusty shade that didn't come close to looking like a little red dress. But she still wondered if she was overdressed. She turned to see the slope of the back, and then sighed. She had already tried on several dresses and this was the one she liked best. With the decision made she changed back into work clothes and went back to work tidying and preparing for the opening.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

By the time Suzie looked up from the work she was doing later that day, it was nearly time to go to dinner. She tossed the dust rags she had been doing a final polish of the railings and fixtures with into a bucket, and walked towards her room. She noticed Ben standing beside one of the tall windows that overlooked the water.

“What are you up to, Ben?” Suzie asked as she paused in the hallway.

“I thought I saw someone,” Ben said with a shake of his head. “It looked like they were walking around the house, but when I went out to look no one was there.”

“Well, we get a lot of looky-loos,” Suzie explained. “Tourists that think it's okay to peek in windows or cut around the property to get to the beach. I wouldn't worry about it too much.”

“I guess,” Ben said with a slight frown.

“Don't worry, Ben, the place isn't haunted,” Suzie teased lightly to try to brighten his mood.

“Are you sure about that?” he asked with an arched eyebrow. “You never know what history this place might hold.”

“You have a good point,” Suzie said with a smile. “But if there are any spirits hiding out in these walls, they don't seem to be sociable ones.”

He laughed at that and nodded. “I guess it could have been a reflection or something. Mom said you're going out tonight?” he leaned back against an end table and studied Suzie for a moment.

“Yes, there's a local fisherman that I've become friends with,” Suzie explained as she ran her fingers through her hair. “But I can't go looking like this.”

“So, a boyfriend?” Ben asked suspiciously.

Suzie did a double take at his tone. She wasn't used to having

her activity monitored by anyone, especially not Ben, who she still saw as the six-year-old boy who would nearly knock the wind out of her every time he hugged her.

“A friend,” she clarified sternly.

“Uh huh,” he said with little belief in his voice. “What about Mom? Has she been seeing anyone?”

“Benjamin,” Suzie said as she crossed her arms. “I think that's something you should ask her about.”

“Oh, I know,” he said in a more relaxed tone. “I just want her to be happy, Suzie,” he said in a soft voice.

Suzie's expression softened as she realized he wasn't trying to spy on his mother, he was hoping that she had met someone.

“You and your sister make her very happy, Ben,” Suzie said warmly.

“This is the happiest I've ever seen her,” Ben admitted. “Thanks for that, Suzie.”

Suzie crossed the distance between them and hugged him. “She'd do the same for me, Ben. Your mother is an amazing woman.”

“I know,” Ben smiled. “I guess I better get prepared for the interrogation.”

“I would highly recommend it,” Suzie laughed and walked back towards her room. She took a quick shower and then dried and styled her hair. She added a light amount of make-up and then dressed. It must have taken longer than she thought because when she was done, she heard a knock on the front door of Dune House.

“Paul's here!” Mary called out as she walked past the open door of Suzie's room. Suzie stared a moment longer at her reflection in the mirror, and felt a nervous flutter.

“I'll be right there,” she called back as she straightened a few strands of her hair. She turned away from the mirror and snatched up her purse. As she stepped out into the hallway she glanced over the state of the paintings and rug that lined it. Everything looked like it was in place. There was so much to think about before opening. She was glad to have this pleasant distraction.

When Suzie reached the lobby of the house she found Paul waiting for her. He looked quite handsome in a casual suit and she was immediately glad that she had decided to wear the dress. His lips parted with a soft gasp as he took in the sight of her.

“You look stunning,” he said softly as he lifted his eyes to hers.

“Can't say that you don't clean up nice,” she replied with a light wink. He grinned at her words and offered her his arm. “Oh, wait just a moment, I want you to meet Ben,” Suzie said.

“Ben!” Mary called out from the kitchen. “Suzie has someone that she'd like you to meet!”

Ben bounded down the stairs from the second floor. The sight of him brought back memories of when he was just a little boy running down the stairs. Suzie couldn't help but laugh.

“This must be Paul,” Ben said with a slow, sly smile as he looked Paul up and down. Suzie's eyes widened. She wondered if he would question him about whether he was a friend or a boyfriend. Ben could be mischievous.

“I am Paul,” Paul replied with a broad smile. “You must be Ben,” he glanced from Ben to Mary and back again. “You look just like your beautiful mother!”

“Oh Paul,” Mary smiled and waved her hand dismissively.

Ben folded his arms across his chest and narrowed his eyes. Suzie was a little surprised by his demeanor.

“And just what are your intentions with Suzie?” he asked in a playfully deepened voice. “She's pretty much my aunt you know.”

Paul chuckled at Ben's words. “My intentions are to fill her up with some delicious pasta and whisk her away for a walk on the beach.”

“Well, if you feed me too much pasta you might have to roll me along the beach,” Suzie laughed and patted her stomach. “Speaking of which, we should get going.”

“Have a good time,” Mary said as she waved to Suzie.

“But not too good,” Ben warned and raised an eyebrow at Paul.

“Of course,” Paul shook his head and laughed. “Funny kid,” he said as he led Suzie out onto the porch.

“He's really turned out to be a lovely person,” Suzie admitted. “It's pretty wonderful to see.”

“You know what else is wonderful to see?” Paul asked as he helped her down the steps and across the driveway towards his car.

“What?” Suzie asked curiously.

“You in that dress,” he breathed with a hint of a growl beneath his voice. Suzie giggled.

“I'm glad you like it,” she murmured. He opened the car door for her and she settled inside. As she watched him walk around the front of the car she realized just how good it felt to have a man

appreciate her the way he did. She enjoyed every aspect of her time with Paul. Now she just had to learn to relax.

“Are you excited about opening day?” Paul asked. He started the car and they began pulling out of the driveway.

“Very excited,” Suzie admitted. “We have four guests booked!”

“Wow, that's fantastic,” Paul said. He seemed genuinely impressed. “I knew you two could pull it off.”

“Not without your help,” Suzie said and laid her hand lightly over his. He glanced up at her with a sparkle in his eye and held her gaze for a moment before looking back at the road.

“It was my pleasure,” he replied softly. “Seeing you in overalls is almost as lovely as seeing you in that dress.”

“I doubt that,” Suzie grinned and they both laughed.

When Suzie and Paul reached Cheney's it was bustling with customers. Suzie was looking forward to a big plate of spaghetti. She had never been dainty or shy about eating. She had a naturally slim figure but as she was getting a little older she did notice that she was having to work a little harder to maintain it. She didn't care. She was still eating a big plate of spaghetti. And lots of garlic bread. When Paul put his hand on the small of her back to guide her inside, she suddenly wondered if that was a good idea. What if he tried to kiss her again? What if she wanted to kiss him? Garlic breath could ruin a moment.

As they settled at a table in the busy restaurant she sneaked a glance up at Paul. He was reading over the menu. She watched his lips as they pursed together in thought. Her mind drifted to what it would be like to kiss him.

“Suzie, did you find something you'd like?” he asked curiously. Yes, Suzie thought to herself, yes, I think I did. Then she realized he was talking about pasta.

“Oh uh, I think maybe I'll just have some salad,” she stumbled out.

“Salad?” he raised his eyebrows. “I thought you wanted pasta?”

“I did,” she looked down at the menu. “But now I think maybe something lighter.”

Paul closed his menu and put it down on the table. He frowned with concern as he looked at her.

“Are you not feeling well? We can always do this another night,” he offered.

“I'm fine, I promise,” Suzie said cheerfully.

“Salad,” he muttered under his breath and eyed her suspiciously.

“All right, all right, maybe just a little pasta,” Suzie laughed.

“That's more like it,” he grinned.

Two plates of pasta later, Suzie had plenty of garlic on her breath. She groaned as she sat back in her chair.

“I'm so full!”

“Don't worry, we're going to walk it off,” Paul grinned.

Walk it off. That meant that she was going to be alone with him on the beach, with garlic breath. But she didn't care anymore. She couldn't wait to hold his hand and feel the sand under her feet. They shared a piece of pie, too. They were so consumed by the delicious taste that they didn’t say much of anything to each other. When the waitress came to take away the plates, Suzie felt her heart beat faster. This meant that soon they would be walking out onto the beach. She was both excited and nervous about being truly alone with Paul. Paul paid the check and then offered his arm.

“Shall we?” he suggested.

“Absolutely,” Suzie said as she stood up from her chair and wound her arm through his. “Thanks for dinner.”

“Thanks for the company,” he replied warmly. As they walked past the host stand in the front of the restaurant, Suzie managed to snag a breath mint from a small dish. She popped it into her mouth when Paul wasn't looking. As they stepped out of the restaurant the sun was offering its last shreds of light. The air was warm but disrupted by a cool breeze from the water.

“Seems like the perfect night for a walk on the beach,” Paul said quietly. “Are you up for it?”

“Yes,” Suzie replied, trying her best to sound confident and not nervous. She had interviewed powerful people, she had crawled into dilapidated houses, and confronted angry protestors. But being

alone with Paul made her feel like a leaf clinging to a tiny branch in the middle of a hurricane. As they drove back towards Dune House Paul brought up the opening.

“What guests do you have booked?” he asked.

“We have four booked right now. One single man, one single woman, and a married couple,” Suzie replied.

“Two singles, eh?” Paul smiled. “Maybe you'll have a love connection.”

“Maybe,” Suzie replied. He pulled into the long driveway of Dune House. Suzie could see lights on in the living room, so she knew someone was still up. As she stepped out of the car Paul slid his hands into hers. It felt so natural to have the warmth of his skin against the curve of her palm. They walked down a few wooden steps to the beach, which was almost empty. It was a week night, and though the beach was gorgeous, locals were used to having it any time they wanted so they didn't populate it too much during the evenings. Stars were beginning to stretch across the sky. Suzie left her shoes by the steps. Paul followed suit, along with his socks. They strolled in silence right at the water's edge, taking in the beauty of the night.

“Suzie,” Paul said, breaking the silence with the flow of his slightly rough voice. “Can we stop for a moment?” he asked and tightened his grasp on her hand. Suzie's heart jumped. She felt a buzz creeping through her body that made her nerves feel as if they were sparking.

“Sure,” she paused and stepped a little further into the water so that she could feel its ebb and flow.

“I know that you have so much going on right now,” he said gently. “I really appreciate you taking time out for dinner.”

“I couldn't think of a better way to spend my evening,” she said in a murmur and glanced up at him shyly. The moment her eyes met his, Paul reached for her. She felt the spray of the water against her ankles as he tangled his fingers in her hair. Her eyes fell shut and her chin tilted upward. The warmth of his lips drew close to hers. This was it. This was the moment. When the silk of his lips embraced her own, she felt as if her entire body was being swept away by the tug of the waves. She had scoffed at love before, at the pop of a leg, or the swoon of a woman being kissed. But in that moment she believed in it all. It was all proving to be true. His fingers rubbed gently along the rise of her neck as the kiss

continued. When it finally broke, she stared into his eyes. He seemed fairly breathless himself, his hands still gently encircling the back of her neck.

“Wasn't too bad was it?” he asked, a hint of insecurity in his eyes. “I'm a little out of practice,” he admitted.

“Wasn't bad at all,” Suzie replied in a whisper. “But maybe we could both use a little more practice,” she murmured as she pushed her lips back against his. He smiled through the kiss and they both naturally fell into the rhythm of passion. When the kiss broke again, Paul wrapped his arms around her. The sound of the waves crashing surrounded them both. Suzie could hear Paul's heart beating quickly in his chest. She closed her eyes and savored the sound. She had done it. She had officially crossed the line from being friends, to being something much much more. She still had no idea what that meant, but she didn't regret it.

Paul walked her back to Dune House. Suzie waved to him from the porch as she let herself in. She walked through the lobby area into the living room. Ben and Mary were sitting on the couch each with a drink in hand, talking with laughter in their voices. From the bits and pieces that Suzie heard she assumed they were talking about Ben and Catherine's childhood antics.

“Hello you two,” Suzie said.

“Hello to you,” Mary said as she glanced from Suzie to the clock on the wall and back to her again. “I wasn't sure what time you'd be home.”

“It's a little late,” Ben wagged his finger playfully.

“Hmm, I think it's not late enough,” Mary grinned.

“On that note, I'm going to head up to bed,” Ben said with a short laugh. Suzie was doing her best to hide the blush in her cheeks. Once Ben had gone up to bed Mary drew Suzie into the

dining room.

“Now, you and I need some alone time,” she said with warmth in her voice.

“That sounds good,” Suzie said happily.

Mary sat down at the dining room table. She had placed a candle in the center. As she lit it, Suzie sat down in a chair beside her and breathed a long, slow sigh.

“So, how did it go?” Mary asked eagerly.

“How did what go?” Suzie asked innocently.

“Did it happen? Did you two finally kiss?” Mary demanded impatiently.

Suzie couldn't hide the smile that crept onto her lips. “Maybe,” she said quietly.

“Oh I see, maybe,” Mary rolled her eyes. “Well, was this kiss that might have happened a good kiss?”

“It might have been the best kiss of my life,” Suzie confessed.

“Wow! That's saying a lot!” Mary said with surprise.

“Hey!” Suzie countered. “What are you implying?”

They both broke down into laughter. By the time they had settled again, the candle was burning strong.

“It's amazing to think that we are going to be open for business tomorrow,” Mary said as she glanced over the large dining room. It had been redecorated with new paint, new paintings, and new light fixtures. But it was still Dune House, and still had a classic feeling to it.

“It's amazing to me that my life has changed so much in such a short time,” Mary said as she set the lighter down. “I didn't think any of this would happen, and now that it has, I can't imagine my life any other way.”

“Do you mean that?” Suzie asked. “You don't have any desire to go back?”

“Not an ounce,” Mary shook her head. “Ben and Catherine have their own lives. The best part is, whenever they want to visit they will have a place to sleep, and paradise outside to enjoy. I feel alive in many ways for the first time, Suzie, and I have you to thank for that.”

“You have yourself to thank for that,” Suzie corrected.

“No, I mean it,” Mary insisted. “I never would have done anything like this on my own. Because you were so kind and included me in all of this I now have a future I can look forward to.

I just can’t thank you enough for that.”

“I couldn't even count on my fingers and toes the things I have to be thankful to you about, Mary. I'm so glad we got to do this together,” she smiled.

“Well, I lit this candle because I figured as we embark on a new journey, we can make a wish. Maybe it's not a birthday wish, but it is still a wish.”

The two leaned close to the flame. They closed their eyes. Then they blew out the flame together.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

On the morning of opening weekend, Suzie woke up with a start. She felt as if she had forgotten to do everything. That she wasn't ready for Dune House to open for business. But she didn't have too much time to think about it, because Mary came bursting through her door.

“Are you ready?” she asked happily as Suzie jumped out of bed.

“I am, I just don't know if Dune House is,” Suzie said with concern.

“Nope, none of that, we did everything that needed to be done. Everything is ready to go. There's no reason to believe that things will not be ready as they should be today. No worrying!” Mary insisted and clapped her hands together sharply. “Today will be magic!”

“All right, all right, who can argue with an attitude like that?” Suzie grinned and stumbled towards her closet for clothing. After Mary left the room, Suzie dressed. She tried to focus on the opening, but the memory of the kiss she had shared with Paul was pulling at her mind as well. She knew that she would be seeing him later that day as he had promised that he would be there to check on the opening before he left for a couple of nights fishing. She wondered what it would be like to see him in the light of day. She had to admit, the memory was a very nice one. When she joined Mary in the kitchen she already had coffee and a bowl of fresh fruit out to enjoy.

“You are way too good at this,” Suzie accused with a smile as she snatched up an apple and crunched into it.

“This, I have been doing all my life,” Mary said with a laugh. “I could make breakfast and a pot of coffee in my sleep.”

“Good to know,” Suzie grinned. After they shared a cup of coffee

and some breakfast they both cleaned up the kitchen to ensure that it was spotless. It was not an area for the guests but it was still good to make sure it was in tip-top shape. The lunch foods were already prepped for their early guests. Now, it was just a matter of waiting for the first to arrive. They didn't have to wait long before they heard a car pulling up the front driveway.

“Here we go!” Mary squealed happily. “Our very first guest!”

“Other than Ben of course,” Suzie grinned. They walked towards the front door. Outside a car had just parked. It was dusty and old. Nothing fancy. But the man who stepped out of the car was a bit surprising. Suzie noticed right away that he was dressed in an old fashioned way. He had a three piece tan suit with a scruff of a tie at his neck. His glasses were thin rimmed and set low on his nose. His blonde hair was wavy and a little mussed. He was on the shorter side with a slightly round belly. He looked right past Suzie and Mary and instead squinted up at the old house.

“Exquisite,” he muttered as he began walking towards the porch. He grabbed the railing and shook it slightly. “Well, this isn't original,” he frowned and fixed a glare on Suzie and Mary.

“The original was a safety hazard,” Suzie volunteered. “You must be Martin Cote. Welcome to Dune House.”

“I am, I am,” he said. He seemed very distracted as his gaze passed over the roof before returning to them.

“Let me get your bags,” Suzie offered as she stepped down from the porch.

“No, don't do that,” he said sharply and hurried past her. He opened the trunk of the car and began sorting through the contents. Suzie and Mary exchanged an anxious look. Suzie frowned. Martin was their first official guest and it didn't seem as if they were getting off to a good start. Martin began lifting equipment out of the trunk. It looked like expensive stuff.

“If you could just show me to my room,” he grunted. He insisted on carrying all of the equipment himself. Mary watched him nervously as he maneuvered the steps and made it to the porch.

“Of course, it's just down the hall,” she said as she opened the door to the house for him. He had specifically requested a room on the ground floor. Suzie closed the trunk gently. She was a little surprised to see what he was bringing with him, but she knew that dealing with unusual guests was going to be one of the trials of running a B & B. At least he had only booked the room for two

nights. She followed Mary back into the house. Mary passed a grimace over her shoulder at Suzie and Suzie raised her eyebrows in response. They had always been able to communicate without having to use words.

“Everything is here for you,” Mary explained as she showed Martin the room. He was busy carefully setting his equipment down on the bed. Suzie spotted a small overnight bag, everything else was cameras, strange electronic readers of some sort, and something that looked like a handheld metal detector.

“There is a small bathroom in this room,” Mary opened the door so that he could see. “But if you would prefer, your key also opens the shared bathroom which has a large shower and bathtub that you can use.”

“This will be fine,” Martin said dismissively. “I'm a bit tired from traveling. So, if you wouldn't mind?”

Suzie nodded. “Of course. We can take care of your registration at dinner tonight. If you'd like I can bring your lunch to the room.”

“No, it's fine, I just ate,” he said and walked towards them in an effort to essentially push them out the door. Once Mary and Suzie were in the hall he closed the door firmly. Suzie heard the lock engage.

“Wow,” she mouthed to Mary who was standing dumbfounded in the hall. She had practiced a long speech to give to every new guest and he had only heard the beginning of it.

Suzie and Mary walked down the hall and back to the kitchen. Once they were sure no one was in earshot, they spoke in hushed voices.

“Don't you think he's a little odd?” Mary asked.

“A little?” Suzie giggled. “I'm sure he'll be friendlier after he has a rest.”

“Maybe so,” Mary nodded. “I guess we will have to become accustomed to different personalities.”

“Morning,” Ben said sleepily as he walked down the stairs. He was dressed for the day, but looked like he should have been back in bed.

“Are you feeling okay?” Mary asked with concern. She reached up to feel his forehead.

“I'm fine, Mom,” he smiled ruefully and pushed her hand gently away. “I just stayed up a little too late.”

“Talking to all those girlfriends,” Mary chastised.

“I don't have a girlfriend, Mom,” Ben laughed. “I have girls that are friends.”

“Hmm, if you take them out to dinner, they're more than friends,” Mary argued. “Aren't I right, Suzie?” she asked. Suzie raised her hands into the air and laughed.

“I'm not getting into the middle of this one!”

“Chicken,” Mary accused in a friendly tone.

“Anything you two need help with?” Ben offered.

“Actually, if you wouldn't mind taking a walk around the grounds to make sure that everything looks nice that would be very helpful,” Suzie said.

“I can do that,” Ben announced. He kissed his mother's cheek and then walked out through the side sliding door that led onto the wraparound porch.

“They are girlfriends,” Mary insisted in a whisper.

“Times are different now, Mary,” Suzie pointed out. “They call it playing the field I think.”

“Hmph,” Mary narrowed her eyes. “Sounds like the good life to me. Who is ever going to want to commit if they can play the field instead?”

Suzie raised an eyebrow. It was a good point. “I'm sure Ben will find someone he wants to be more exclusive with eventually,” Suzie suggested.

“Not too soon,” Mary added.

“Definitely not too soon,” Suzie grinned. As she opened her mouth to say something else, they heard a squealing of brakes in the parking lot.

“Must be our next guest,” Mary said and smiled grimly. “This should be interesting.”

“Hopefully not as interesting as Martin,” Suzie pointed out in a whisper.

Suzie was walking towards the door when it was suddenly flung open. The woman on the other side paused in the doorway. Her face was almost completely hidden by huge, dark sunglasses. They seemed to be a fashionable pair, and the B & B was by the sea, but it made it nearly impossible to make eye contact.

“Hello, and welcome to Dune House,” Suzie said warmly.

“Thank you,” the woman replied coolly. She had a thin scarf tied around her dark, straight hair. She looked to be in her thirties, though the dark glasses made it hard to tell for sure. “At least it was

easy to find," she said as she scrunched up her nose a little. "This is quite a quaint little town."

The way she said quaint made it definitely not a compliment. Mary stepped up behind Suzie as the woman stepped inside.

"Garber is small, but it has a lot to offer," Mary said happily.

"I hope that's the case," the woman said. "My name is Alice Montreal, I have a reservation."

"Yes of course, Ms. Montreal," Suzie said. "Please allow me to take your bag. Your room is all ready for you."

"Hmm," she nodded a little and then lowered her sunglasses. "So, there is no pool?"

"Well, we thought that might be a little redundant," Mary laughed as she gestured to the large windows that looked out over the wide, open sea.

"I suppose," she shrugged a little and handed over a white, leather overnight bag. When Suzie took it she was surprised by the weight of it. It was such a small bag, it must have had plenty packed into it to make it heavy. Mary chatted to her about special spots in Garber to visit, and meal times at the B & B. Suzie didn't know if the woman was listening as she had pushed her sunglasses back up along her nose.

When they stepped into Alice's room, the woman laughed. "Very funny," she said. She looked over the perfectly made bed, the assortment of books and magazines beside the bed, and the robe hanging on the closet door.

"I'm sorry?" Suzie asked. "What's funny?"

"This can't be my room," Alice said as she turned towards Suzie. "It's so tiny."

"Cozy," Mary piped up.

"Tiny," Alice argued. "Is there even a bathroom in here?" she asked.

"Right here," Suzie said smoothly. She was doing her best to hide the annoyance in her voice. She opened the door to the small bathroom.

"But there's only a tiny shower," Alice complained. "This is nothing like the room that I saw on the website."

"Well, we do have an assortment of rooms," Mary said hesitantly.

"But you made a reservation for the single studio room," Suzie pointed out. "That's what this is. There's room enough for a table

and chairs, an easy chair, the bed. Plus you have a view of the water," Suzie explained.

"The room I saw was huge," Alice insisted, she was irritated.

"But that is not the room you paid for," Suzie explained in a soft tone.

"That's false advertising!" Alice huffed. "I can't believe this. I knew I shouldn't have taken a chance on a rinky dink place like this…"

"Now, wait just a moment," Mary said quickly when she saw anger rising in Suzie's expression. "It's our opening weekend, and we're not booked solid. I understand there's been some confusion. Perhaps we could upgrade you to one of the larger rooms?"

Suzie did her best not to wince. She could already see that Mary was going to be much better at customer service than she was. But the woman was rubbing her up the wrong way. The last thing she wanted was to give her the larger room.

"I'm not paying a penny more," Alice said firmly. "This is supposed to be a weekend getaway and I'm already feeling very stressed."

Mary met Suzie's eyes questioningly. Suzie could tell that Mary wanted to agree to upgrade the room without charging more. She trusted Mary's judgment.

"Fine, we can arrange something," Suzie said calmly. "I'll review the website and make sure that the pricing and room selection is clearer," she added, though she knew it was perfectly clear. "Perhaps you'd like to wait on the porch with a nice glass of home brewed tea while we get the room prepared for you?"

"Just water will be fine," Alice said with a sniff. She plucked her bag from the bed where Suzie had placed it. Then she turned and strutted out of the room.

"I'm sorry, Suzie, I hope you don't think that I was too interfering," Mary said quickly.

"You handled it much better than I ever could have," Suzie replied with a shake of her head. "I don't know how you can keep your cool."

"I've been a referee for a long time," she laughed softly. "Which room should I move her to?"

"Put her in the Venice suite," Suzie suggested. "Maybe that will appease her."

The Venice suite was decorated to remind guests of the city of

Venice, Italy. It had luxurious tapestries as well as paintings of the city and even a functioning water feature.

“Are you sure?” Mary asked with surprise. “That's one of our most expensive rooms, it even has the garden tub in the bathroom.”

“It's opening weekend,” Suzie replied. “I think we can afford to spoil the guests a little. Besides, the last thing we want is bad word of mouth.”

“Okay,” Mary nodded and headed off to prepare the room. As Suzie walked back towards the kitchen she heard the front door open and close. She wasn't expecting the next guest for another hour, but she knew schedules could run early or late. With a smile she walked into the lobby area. Paul was waiting to greet her with a bouquet of fresh, local flowers.

“Happy opening day,” he smiled over the top of the flowers.

“Thank you,” Suzie beamed. She looked away from him shyly as she took the flowers. They were a lovely gesture, and Suzie gave them a light sniff. “They're beautiful.”

“How is it going so far?” he asked curiously as he followed her into the kitchen. She found a vase and placed the flowers in some water.

“It's going,” Suzie replied with a wry smile. “Let's just say, I'm glad Mary is good with customer service.”

“And you're not?” he asked teasingly. “I would never believe that!”

“I try,” she said with a dramatic sigh.

“Well, don't worry, you'll get used to it soon enough,” Paul said. “If not, I can always take you out for an escape on the boat.”

“I'll hold you to that,” Suzie smiled as she rested her elbows on the kitchen counter. Paul leaned close. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized he was going in for a kiss. She returned a light peck.

“Wow-wee is he included in the room rate?” Alice asked as she wandered into the kitchen. There was a sign that clearly stated staff only, but she ignored it.

“Sorry ma'am,” Paul said with a friendly smile. “I'm taken.”

“Shame, you were about the only luxury I've spotted in this place so far,” Alice sighed.

Paul glanced at Suzie and tried not to grin. Suzie was doing her best to hide the fact that she was fuming.

“Can I get you anything? A bottle of water? Some tea?” she

offered, trying to think of what Mary would do.

“A room would be nice,” Alice said haughtily. Suzie could tell that Alice was going to be one difficult guest. Maybe it was best that she got used to it, as Suzie was sure this would be the first of many hard to please guests.

“I'm sure it's just about ready,” Suzie offered and felt Paul's hand curve over hers with a calming touch.

“Your room is ready, Alice,” Mary said from the doorway of the kitchen.

“It's about time,” Alice muttered. Mary rolled her eyes behind Alice's back as she walked down the hall. Once they were gone Suzie turned back to Paul.

“So, am I a liar?” he asked as he looked into her eyes.

“Huh?” Suzie asked as she stared back with some confusion.

“Did I lie, when I said I was taken?” he asked and still held her gaze. Suzie was startled by the question. She had just become comfortable with the idea of kissing him and now he was asking if they were exclusive. She had no idea how to answer that. She thought of Ben playing the field and wondered if that might be what she wanted. Committing to one man was a huge step.

“Well, I…”

“Suzie,” Jason said from the entrance of the kitchen. “Sorry if I'm interrupting.”

Suzie hid a sigh of relief. “Jason, good to see you,” she said. Paul managed not to glare at him.

“Hello Jason, how are things?” he asked in a mild tone.

“Pretty good,” Jason said warmly. “Just wanted to check on the opening.”

“It's going well, we already had two guests check in,” Suzie said proudly.

“Good,” Jason nodded as he swept his gaze over the kitchen. “Hard to believe this place is going to be so full of life again.”

Jason had grown up in Dune House, though his relationship with his father had not been great. That was one of the reasons his father had left the house to Suzie instead of to his son. But the bulk of his wealth, of which the amount was a well-kept secret but was rumored to be quite considerable, was left to Jason.

“Well, you were a big part of making that happen, Jason,” Suzie reminded him with a smile. Her cousin was much younger than her, and very handsome in his uniform. He was well liked in Garber and

had played a big role in calming some of the locals when they were upset over Dune House being converted back into a B & B. Not everyone was a fan of more tourists in the area. With his thick, red hair and brilliant smile, Suzie could easily see why he was so well received by people. She was just glad that Alice wasn't around to ask if he was a perk.

“I couldn't be happier to see it alive again,” Jason admitted. “If you need anything, I'm just a phone call away, all right?”

“Actually, I'd love for you to meet Mary's son, Ben,” Suzie said. “He's a little younger than you but he's a good kid.”

“I'm not a kid, Suzie,” Ben pointed out as he stepped in through the sliding door.

“You're both kids, like puppies,” Paul muttered with his usual gruff personality.

“Watch it, Paul,” Jason said with a short laugh.

“Jason, this is Ben,” Suzie said as Ben walked towards them. “Ben, this is my cousin, Jason.”

“Nice to meet you,” Ben said and shook Jason's hand. His eyebrows raised. “Didn't know that Suzie had law enforcement in the family.”

“Now you do,” Suzie said and grinned. “So, you better behave.”

“Who, me?” Ben said with an innocent smile.

“How long are you in town for, Ben?” Jason asked.

“Just a couple more days,” Ben replied.

“Well, if you're not busy tomorrow night, I'll take you around town and show you the place. With your mother living here now I'm sure you'll visit more,” he added.

“That would be great,” Ben smiled eagerly.

“Oh boy, good thing I'm shipping out for a couple of nights, with these two prowling around town,” Paul grimaced.

Jason rolled his eyes and Ben smirked.

“I need to get back to my patrol, but, Ben I'll stop by tomorrow after my shift, okay?” he nodded at Ben.

“Sounds good,” Ben agreed.

“Everything looked good outside, Suzie,” Ben said after Jason left.

“Good,” Suzie nodded.

“When do your next guests arrive?” Paul asked.

“Not until this evening, so there's a little time between,” Suzie replied.

“That's good, it keeps the chaos to a minimum,” Paul chuckled.

“Speaking of chaos, are you ready for your trip tonight? Have you checked the weather patterns?” she asked with some concern. She always worried when Paul was out on the water. He was certainly experienced, but experience didn't mean much against a fierce storm.

“Everything is clear, should be a perfect weekend for your guests to spend on the beach,” he pointed out.

“I hope they enjoy it,” Suzie said with a hint of pride.

“I'll see you two later,” Ben said as he grabbed an apple from the bowl of fruit. “I'm going to catch up on some homework.”

Once Suzie and Paul were alone again in the kitchen, the glaring obviousness of his unanswered question seemed to fill the room. He lifted his eyes to hers, and without him speaking a word, she knew that he was still waiting on an answer.

“Oh, I picked up something for your trip,” Suzie said as she turned and rummaged in the tall cabinet beside the refrigerator. She heard Paul heave a heavy breath as she avoided the topic again, but he didn't press it. When she turned back with a case of his favorite soda, he grinned.

“Just what I needed,” he said happily. “I wasn't sure if I'd have time to get to the store before I left.”

“And this,” she added and handed him a slim book. “In case you have any time to relax.”

He picked up the book and glanced over the title. “Mystery, just what I like,” he grinned. “Suzie, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you knew a little bit about me.”

“Just a little,” she smiled.

He glanced at his watch. “Well, I should be going, I hope that everything else goes smoothly. I'll call you when I get back to land, okay?”

“Okay,” she nodded and stood awkwardly before him. He eased the tension by leaning forward for a slow, soft kiss. Suzie felt herself rise up on her toes to lengthen the kiss. When he broke the kiss he winked at her and turned to walk out of the house.

“Maybe when I get back, we can talk?” he asked as he started to cross through the doorway.

Suzie gulped. “Absolutely,” she managed to say. She heard him whistle lightly beneath his breath as he walked through the door.

Suzie felt relieved and disappointed that he was gone. It was so

confusing to be so attracted to him, but so unsure of what it was she wanted that attraction to lead to. She was glad there would be a few quiet hours between Alice's arrival, and that of the next guests. Mary returned to the kitchen.

“That woman is high maintenance,” she said with a shake of her head.

“Ben taught you that, didn't he?” Suzie grinned.

“Yup,” Mary nodded. “Is Paul gone?” she asked.

“Yes, he's shipping out tonight,” Suzie explained.

“Too bad,” Mary frowned. “Well, at least Alice is settled for the moment. She thought the room was acceptable,” Mary laughed at that.

“This is going to take a lot more patience than I thought,” Suzie grimaced.

“I'm going to check and see if Martin would like anything,” Mary said. As she walked away Suzie sat down in one of the dining room chairs and drew a deep breath to calm herself.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

Everything seemed to have started calming down and Suzie was enjoying a few minutes to herself before the next guests arrived when she jumped at the ear-splitting scream that came from one of the rooms.

“Oh no!” she nearly fell out of her chair as she lunged towards the hallway. “Something terrible must have happened.”

“What room is it coming from?” Mary asked as she raced after her. With the second less piercing scream it was clear that it was coming from the Venice suite.

“Alice?” Suzie asked as she knocked on the door, and then opened it. “Alice?” Mary stepped in behind her. Suzie could hear water running in the bathroom. The door was closed, but the light was on.

“Alice, are you in there?” Suzie asked as she stepped cautiously towards the door. Before she could open it, it flung open. Suzie braced herself expecting a grisly scene, or a wild animal of some sort. Instead it was Alice dressed only in a towel.

“This water is ice cold,” she huffed. “I ran a bath, and went to step in, and I probably have frostbite in some terrible places right now!”

“It's cold?” Suzie asked with a frown. “It shouldn't be,” she stuck a finger into the water. Although it wasn't ice cold, it certainly wasn't warm enough for a bath.

“I better check the water heater,” Suzie said.

“Yes, you do that,” Alice said with a disgruntled glare. “Some vacation!”

“Don't worry we'll have it fixed up in no time,” Mary assured her.

“I bet,” Alice said with obvious annoyance.

Ben must have heard the screaming, too, because he came bounding down the hall. Mary cut him off in the hallway to ensure that he didn't get a view of Alice in a towel.

“What's going on?” he asked with concern.

“For some reason there's no hot water,” Suzie said as she stepped out of Alice's room.

“Huh, that's strange,” Ben said. “I'll check the water heater.”

“Thanks,” Suzie said with relief. When he headed downstairs Mary turned to Suzie.

“I'm going to put together a plate of snacks for Alice, maybe that will smooth things over a little,” she said and patted Suzie's shoulder. “Don't worry it's just opening weekend hiccups.”

“I hope so,” Suzie grimaced. She was already adding up in her mind how much it was going to cost to get a new hot water heater. They had depleted their funds quite a bit to get Dune House ready for opening.

A few minutes later Ben returned.

“The water heater looks fine,” he said with some confusion. “But the water level is low. It looks like you must have a leak somewhere.”

“A leak?” Mary asked. “But how could the plumber not have seen that when we had the pipes inspected?”

“I don't know, it must have just happened,” Ben said with a shrug. “Because I took a shower last night and the water was fine.”

“Well, we better get a plumber out here,” Suzie said with a grimace. She pulled out her cell phone to call Lester, the plumber they had used before. But his number went to an answering service that stated he was on vacation for the week. “Great, this just keeps getting better and better,” she said with a frown.

“Try not to panic,” Mary said. “There has to be another plumber in town.”

“You know what, I'll call Paul and see if he knows anybody, I'm sure that he's not on the boat yet,” she added.

“I'll keep Alice happy,” Mary said. “I'll try knocking on Martin's door to warn him about the icy shower, too.”

“Thanks, Mary,” Suzie said as she walked away to make the call. Paul picked up on the first ring.

“Missed me already?” he teased.

“Oh Paul, we've got a problem,” Suzie said.

“What's wrong?” he asked, worried by the tone of her voice.

“It looks like there's a leak in the plumbing. The water came out of the pipes but it was ice cold, and now our guests are going to be very unhappy,” she sighed. “I tried calling the plumber we used for the inspection, but he's on vacation. Do you know anyone else I could contact?”

“Let me think a moment,” Paul said. “Actually, I do. He's from a few towns over but I'm sure he'll come right away. I'll text you the number. Tell him that fisherman Paul sent you.”

“Thanks Paul, you're a lifesaver,” Suzie sighed.

“Just remember that,” Paul said lightly. “Don't let this get you down, sweetheart, everything will be fine.”

“That's what everyone keeps saying,” Suzie said with some frustration. “Thank you so much,” she said. “Have a safe trip.”

“I will,” he promised her before hanging up the phone. He immediately texted Suzie the phone number. She dialed the number.

“Doug of Doug's plumbing,” a boisterous voice said.

“Hi Doug, I'm a friend of fisherman Paul's and he said that you might be able to help me. I have a plumbing crisis, but I'm in Garber,” she explained.

“Oh, that's not a problem. I actually don't have any appointments this afternoon so I can come right over. Anything for Paul,” he added.

“Thanks so much. It's a big place, are you familiar with Dune House?” she asked.

“Who isn't?” Doug laughed. “Don't worry, I'll be there in thirty minutes.”

“Thank you so much,” she said before hanging up the phone. She took a deep breath and was starting to feel better.

“I tried knocking on Martin's door, but he's not answering,” Mary said as she walked down the hallway. “But I slipped a note under his door for when he wakes up.”

“He must have been very tired,” Suzie said. “He's been in there for quite some time.”

“Are you sure he didn't leave?” Mary asked.

“No his car is in the driveway, and I haven't seen him walk through the lobby,” Suzie shrugged.

“Well, some people like to sleep on their vacations,” Mary pointed out. “How did the call with Paul go?”

“I've got a plumber coming in thirty minutes,” Suzie replied.

“Let's just hope it's a quick fix and we can get the pipes running well again.”

“I hope so,” Mary crossed her fingers. “If not we could always do it the old fashioned way and heat up some water on the stove. We could call it rustic,” she laughed.

“That's pretty rustic!” Suzie said, but managed a smile. She couldn't help it. Mary's positive attitude tended to spread.

“Don't worry, Suzie,” Ben said. “We'll figure this out.”

When the plumber arrived Suzie and Ben were waiting on the front porch for him. She quickly explained the situation and that the water heater seemed to be working properly but without enough water.

“Well, if there are no leaks inside it must be under the house,” Doug said. “Let me take a look.”

“I'll go with you,” Ben offered. He followed after the plumber. After about twenty minutes the plumber came back to the porch, where Suzie was still waiting, hoping for a good solution.

“Well, you have a damaged pipe under the house,” he declared with a frown.

“What? How does that happen?” Suzie asked with concern. “We haven't had any bad weather, and the plumber who did the inspection said that the pipes were fine.”

“Honestly, it looks like someone did it on purpose,” the plumber said. “The wood around the porch was tugged away so someone could get access.”

“How strange,” Suzie sighed. “Maybe one of the locals is still unhappy about the B & B. Can you fix it?” she asked with urgency.

“I can,” he said with confidence. “I just need to go into town for some supplies. I'll be back soon and should have it fixed in about two hours.”

“Oh good,” Suzie said. “Thank you, this is our opening weekend.”

“You've got a beautiful place here,” he said and headed for his van.

“Hopefully, whoever did this won't try anything else,” Ben said with a shake of his head.

“The important thing is that it's getting fixed,” Suzie said. “And none too soon, as our next guests are due in an hour. I'd hate to have them drive up in the middle of the repair. But if they do, they do.”

Suzie tried to keep herself busy preparing some food for the guests to feast on if they chose. She sent Mary for a walk on the beach with Ben, since there wasn't much they could do until the next guests arrived. She noticed that Martin still hadn't emerged from his room. She decided to walk by the room to see if she could hear any signs of life. As she walked by she noticed that the slip of paper Mary had pushed underneath the door was sticking half out. She thought that was a little strange. If Martin was inside why had he pushed the note out? She lifted her hand to knock on the door, but before she could, Alice came storming down the hall.

“I'm going out for a run on the beach,” she said with annoyance. “I expect to be able to shower when I get back.”

“Well, hopefully the pipe will be fixed by then,” Suzie said as courteously as she could.

“I should hope so,” Alice said as she pushed past Suzie. She was dressed in a fancy running suit with her long, black hair in a high ponytail. Suzie shook her head as she watched her go. She was starting to think this guest was more trouble than she was worth, but in some way she could understand her frustration. She glanced at her watch to see that the guests they were waiting for were already an hour late. She hoped they would still show up. She checked the information about them on the small computer they had in the lobby area. They were out of town guests, so it was very possible that they had been delayed. She had forgotten about the note under Martin's door by the time Mary and Ben had returned from their walk.

“We saw Alice on the beach,” Mary grimaced. “She's in a real good mood.”

“Well, all we can do is try to accommodate her,” Suzie shrugged. “Our next guests are almost two hours late.”

“Have you heard from the plumber yet?” Ben asked.

“Not yet, I don't think he's back yet. And Alice isn't going to be too happy about that,” she sighed.

“With the speed she was running it will probably be a while before she gets back,” Mary said.

“That's good at least,” Suzie said.

“Oh look, someone's pulling up, looks like the plumber,” Ben said. “I'll check to make sure he has all of the parts he needs.”

“Thanks,” Suzie said. After Ben walked out Mary spotted another car coming up.

“Oh and there's someone else pulling in behind him,” Mary said. “Must be the guests we're waiting for.”

“We made it!” the woman said breathlessly as she burst through the door. “I didn't think I'd ever get out of that car!”

“Oh Diana, you're being a little dramatic, aren't you?” asked the man who stepped in behind her. He was carrying their bags.

“Maybe if you had asked for directions, it would not have taken us two extra hours to get here, Jim,” Diana complained and shook her head. “Men,” she rolled her eyes at Suzie and Mary.

“Diana, that's what a GPS is for so you don't have to ask for directions,” Jim pointed out as Suzie took a few of the bags from him. “Sorry we're late,” he said sheepishly. “Apparently some of the roads leading into Garber aren't accurate on my GPS.”

“Small towns can be that way,” Suzie said with sympathy. “I'm sorry you've both had such a rough trip. Hopefully we can change that,” she smiled.

“All I need is a bathroom and a cup of hot coffee,” Diana said.

“Right this way,” Mary laughed and led Diana off towards the guest bathroom.

Jim stretched his arms above his head, trying to loosen his back.

“She's right,” he admitted. “But I won't tell her that. We drove in circles for about an hour before I finally broke down and asked someone about Dune House. Seems like everyone knows of it!”

“It has been here for a very long time,” Suzie explained as she led him to a couch so he could rest. “So, most of the locals even a few towns over know of it.”

“It doesn't look old at all,” he said with surprise. “I mean, it looks authentic of course. But it's spotless, and looks beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Suzie said warmly. “Would you like some water? Coffee? Maybe a beer?”

“A beer would be great,” he nodded. “We've had a bumpy start to our weekend.”

“I can fix that,” Suzie smiled.

“What? How?” Jim asked.

Just then Diana was returning to the lobby.

“Diana, seeing as you’ve spent extra time traveling here, we would like to make your weekend extra special so you can relax,” Suzie said sympathetically. “So, I've upgraded you to the honeymoon suite.”

Diana's eyes widened. “Really? The one that overlooks the water

and has a spa bath and…"

"That's the one," Suzie laughed. "We're not heavily booked, and I'd like to make sure that you both have the best vacation you can."

"This is wonderful!" she said happily.

"We'll bring your dinner and coffee to your room if you'd like," Mary offered as she returned to the lobby. "Or we could seat you on the deck, there's a nice breeze off the water."

"I think it would be nice to eat in the room tonight," Jim said with a yawn. "I'm pretty tired."

"I'll take you there, now," Mary said.

"Mary, the honeymoon suite!" Suzie called out.

"Oh?" Mary smiled. "I'm sure you'll both enjoy it, it's a huge space."

As Mary led Diana and Jim off, Suzie finally breathed a sigh of relief. Even though they only had four guests she felt as if she had run a marathon. She had a slight twinge of panic over what she might have gotten herself into. Between the troublesome Alice Montreal, the pipe problem, and the question that Paul had posed to her, she was exhausted. Luckily the intercom was set to ring to her room in case there were any problems during the night. Once everyone was settled she and Mary met up in the dining room to make sure things were ready for breakfast the next morning.

"What a day," Mary sighed as she heaved herself into a chair.

"How are you holding up?" Suzie asked.

"I'm okay, I just didn't imagine it would be so frenzied," she laughed.

"And we haven't even made breakfast yet," Suzie pointed out.

"Mom, Suzie, are you in here?" Ben called out from the lobby.

"In the dining room," Mary called back. "What's the verdict?" she asked when Ben walked in.

"Well, it's not good," Ben said grimly. "He's got the pipes flowing for tonight, but you're losing water every time someone uses the water. You're going to have a big bill."

"What about a fix?" Suzie asked hopefully.

"He says that he can fix it," Ben said. "But he has to go into town to get some more parts and the stores won't be open until tomorrow morning. He couldn't see much under the house, but he did say it was strange that the wood was pulled back. It looks like someone pried at it."

"What?" Mary gasped. "Why would anyone do that?"

“I don't know,” Suzie said grimly. “But we better keep a close eye on things until we find out.”

“Thanks for your help, Ben,” Mary said. “Is it okay if we just have a quiet night in tonight? I am bushed.”

“That’s perfect. So am I,” Ben agreed. “I’ll see more of Garber tomorrow. I am going out tomorrow night with Jason and his girlfriend, to check out the Garber nightlife.”

“Garber has nightlife?” Mary asked.

“Jason has a girlfriend?” Suzie asked.

“I guess I'll find out tomorrow,” Ben said.

“And so will we,” Suzie said as she passed a glance to Mary.

Suzie stopped by Martin's room one last time, to offer him dinner, but there was still no answer. She noticed that the note under the door was now completely gone.

That night as she tried to get some rest, her thoughts turned to Paul out on his boat. She wondered what he was doing. Likely fixing up his traps and preparing for the early morning fish.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

Early the next morning Suzie and Mary met in the kitchen. There was breakfast to prepare for four guests. Though Suzie doubted that Martin would join them for that, Alice was there in her robe and fluffy slippers within minutes of the coffee brewing.

“That smells good,” she sighed as she settled down at the dining room table.

“What do you like in your coffee?” Mary asked warmly.

“Two sugars, one cream,” Alice said.

“Did you have a chance to enjoy your bath?” Suzie asked as she set a tray of fruit, danishes, and toast out on the table.

“Yes, I did,” she replied. “I would have preferred if it was ready when I needed it, but I have to admit the water was toasty and the bath was beautiful.”

Suzie smiled with relief. She was glad that Alice seemed to be having a better time now that she could have a bath. Now, if the plumber could get everything fixed properly she could finally feel comfortable again. She looked out the window and was relieved to see the plumber stepping out of his van. At least he would be working on fixing the problem.

“Good morning,” Jim said as he and Diana walked down the hallway towards the dining room table. They were both dressed for the beach, Diana in a bathing suit, Jim in board shorts.

“Good morning,” Mary said as she looked at the two of them.

“It's a lovely day for going to the beach. Feel free to take the chairs and a tent from around the back so you can enjoy the water without too much sun.”

“Thank you so much,” Jim said. “I have to say this place is absolutely wonderful.”

“I'm glad you think so,” Suzie said with a smile. “Remember we

do have lunch and dinner available, but there are also several great restaurants in town you might enjoy. Cheney's is great if you like pasta, and there is also a nice diner that you can get a quick bite at."

"Great," Diana nodded. "I think we're going to spend most of the day out on the beach. Maybe we'll pick something up from the diner."

"Do you have any plans for today?" Mary asked Alice politely.

"I'll probably do a little shopping, if there is any," she said, her snooty attitude returning with force.

"Well, if any of you have any questions about Garber, or Dune House, please feel free to ask at any time," Suzie said quickly.

"Thanks, we'll do that," Jim said.

Suzie went to get herself a cup of coffee. As she stood in the kitchen she looked out over the sandy trail that led from the back of the house to the beach. She noticed that there were some footprints, and what looked like drag marks. She narrowed her eyes, wondering what had caused them. But there wasn't time to investigate as she had to get back to the guests. When she returned to the table she and Mary shared the meal with their guests. They chatted a little about Garber and then everyone went their separate ways.

After cleaning up from breakfast and preparing what she could for lunch, Suzie glanced at her watch. It was getting late, and she hadn't heard a peep from the plumber. She walked out onto the front porch. The plumber's van was still in the parking lot so she assumed he was still working. She stepped back inside and got involved in tidying up the guest rooms. She knocked lightly on Martin's door to see if anything needed cleaning.

"Martin, I'm just checking in to see if you need anything," she called out through the door. There was silence inside, and then a slight scuffing sound. The sound made her a little uneasy. She really wanted to know what he was up to in there. "Martin?" she called out again.

"I'm fine," he finally replied. "Please don't disturb me."

Suzie was surprised by his words but walked away from the door hoping she hadn't interrupted anything important.

"Suzie, have you seen the plumber?" Ben asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"No, I was just going to check on him," she replied.

“I just walked by the area where he is supposed to be working and I didn't hear a sound. I called out to him, but he didn't answer,” he explained with a frown.

“What's going on?” Mary asked as she returned from tidying up the common bathroom.

“Looks like the plumber might be missing in action,” Suzie sighed. “I hope he's reliable.”

“If his van's here and he's nowhere to be seen, then he’s probably under the house still,” Mary pointed out.

“Maybe,” Ben said thoughtfully. “But he didn't answer me when I called to him.”

“He might have just been getting something from his van,” Mary suggested.

“Yeah, we could have just missed each other,” Ben offered.

“Possibly,” Suzie said. “But, we better go make sure he's not under the house. He might be hurt.”

“I’ll go and try call for him again,” Ben said.

“I’ll come, too,” Mary offered.

“Let’s all go together,” Suzie said with a smile.

The three walked out of Dune House.

“I’ll just go passed his van and make sure he isn’t there,” Ben offered.

“Okay, we’ll meet you by the side,” Suzie said as she and Mary walked towards where the plumber should have been working. There was no sign of Doug when they got there.

“Doug,” Suzie crouched down and called through the opening. “Doug?” she said louder as Ben came towards them.

“No luck,” Ben said as he shook his head.

“Where could he be?” Mary asked.

“Here let me try,” Ben offered. “Doug? Doug are you there?” he called out. When he heard no response he crouched down. “Doug?” he called again. “I’ll go see if he is in there.”

“Be careful, Ben!” Mary said fretfully. Ben went on his haunches and crawled under the house.

Suzie and Mary looked at each other nervously as they waited for a response.

“Oh no, oh no!” Ben’s voice bellowed from under the house and Suzie and Mary looked at each other in shock as they jumped at the sound of his worried voice. Ben scrambled out from under the house. When he got to his feet his face was white and his eyes were

wide. “He's down there,” he stammered out.

“What’s wrong then?” Suzie asked anxiously.

“He's dead!” Ben exclaimed.

“What?” Mary gasped as she grabbed her son's hand. “Are you sure? Maybe he's just knocked out?”

“No, Mom,” Ben said, his voice trembling. “I'm pretty sure,” he lowered his voice. “He’s dead.”

“I'll call an ambulance just in case,” Suzie said shakily and pulled out her cell phone. She fired off the details. She then called Jason as Mary tried to soothe Ben. He was obviously shaken up.

“Suzie, I'm going to take Ben inside,” Mary said quietly. “We'll keep everyone away from this area.”

“Thank you,” Suzie said. “Ben, are you okay?” she asked with concern.

“I think so,” he replied nervously. As Mary took Ben inside, the ambulance pulled into the driveway, it must have been only moments away when the call was made. The medics followed Suzie’s directions to get to Doug and went under the house just as Jason's police car pulled up. He kept his lights and sirens off out of respect for Suzie's guests.

“What happened?” he asked as he jogged up to her. Two more police cars pulled in behind his. Suzie guessed it might have been the entire Garber police department.

“I have no idea,” Suzie replied. “The plumber went under the house to do some repairs. It had been almost three hours since the last time we saw him, so we decided to go find him. Ben offered to go under the house to see if he was there. That's when he found Doug. He said that he was sure he’s dead.”

The medics emerged and one shook his head indicating that Doug was definitely deceased. Suzie’s heart dropped as she realized that her worst fears were confirmed.

“Okay, Charlie go check it out,” Jason directed one of the officers that was walking towards him. “But be careful. Don’t disturb anything, it could be evidence.”

When Charlie came back out from under the house his expression was grave. He held up a metal shovel that was speckled with blood.

“I've got the murder weapon,” he said with confidence.

“Well, don't touch it!” Jason said with exasperation. He handed Charlie a plastic evidence bag. When he turned back to Suzie his

expression was serious. “I'm going to have to talk to Ben and Mary as well as your guests, Suzie.”

“Why?” Suzie asked. “I'm sure none of them had anything to do with it.”

“Well, that may be but I have to find out where they were around the time of the murder so we can eliminate them as suspects,” he rested his hand on the side of his gun belt and looked very determined.

“I know you're just doing your job, Jason,” Suzie said quietly. A man was dead, and now her guests would be subjected to a police investigation. It was not the bumps she expected on an opening weekend. “I'll get you their information.”

As the two stepped into Dune House, Alice was entering through the side sliding door. She had said she was going shopping, but she was dressed for the beach.

“Alice, could I speak with you for a moment?” Suzie asked as she blocked her from walking down the hallway towards her room.

“What is it?” Alice asked as she glanced towards Jason. She winked lightly at him when she caught him looking at her tiny bikini.

“There's been an unfortunate incident, and I'm afraid the police will need to question all of the guests,” Suzie explained hesitantly.

“What kind of unfortunate incident?” Alice demanded to know. “Did somebody die or something?”

“Actually, yes,” Suzie replied with a frown. “The plumber that was working under the house, was killed.”

“Great, just great,” Alice rolled her eyes. Suzie winced at her lack of sympathy but she said nothing about it.

“It's just routine in situations like this to find out where everyone was around the time we estimate the death occurred,” Jason explained. Suzie could tell that he was trying his best to play down the event for the sake of the B & B, but she also knew that he had a job that he had to do.

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” Alice said with a sharp shake of her head. “It's none of your business where I was or what I was doing. I am here on vacation,” she added with building frustration.

“And I want you to get back to that vacation as soon as you can,” Jason offered in a docile tone. “But I can't do that unless you can confirm to me your whereabouts.”

Alice blew out a breath of air through her nose and crossed her

arms.

“All you need to know is that I had nothing to do with any of this. Any other questions I'm not answering without a lawyer present,” she insisted.

Jason glanced over at Suzie briefly and then back to Alice.

“This really will be over with if you just answer a few of my questions,” Jason attempted to persuade her.

“I'm not answering any more questions,” Alice said sternly. “In fact, I expect a full refund for my stay here this weekend,” she added and looked pointedly at Suzie.

Suzie narrowed her eyes. She was doing her best not to lose her cool, but Alice was really pushing it. Since she and Mary had already discussed offering their guests a complimentary stay in the future, she wasn't opposed to the refund, but Alice's attitude and refusal to cooperate was really grating on her nerves.

“Here is my card,” Jason said as he handed her a business card. “When you get in contact with your lawyer, have him contact me.”

Alice took the card begrudgingly. Then she turned and walked away with a flick of her long, dark hair.

“She's rather difficult,” Jason said grimly when Alice was out of earshot.

“The question is why is she being so difficult?” Suzie mused with a frown. She was beginning to think that Alice might just be hiding something.

“Honestly, her evasiveness makes her look pretty suspicious,” Jason admitted. “We'll look into her and see if she has any connections to Doug.”

Suzie nodded. She felt queasy. She wanted to believe that none of the guests at Dune House had any involvement with Doug's death.

“Hello?” a timid voice called out that Suzie recognized as Jim's.

“Jim and Diana must be back,” she said to Jason. “Hopefully, they'll be more forthcoming.”

Jason and Suzie walked out into the lobby where Jim and a very sunburned Diana were glancing around apprehensively.

“What's going on?” Diana asked when she saw Suzie. “Why are the police here?”

“Unfortunately, there's been a death on the property,” Suzie explained carefully.

“I just need to ask you a few questions about where you both

were this morning when the death occurred," Jason added.

"A death?" Jim stumbled out. "Who was it? Not any of the guests or staff I hope?"

"No," Suzie shook her head, and then let Jason take over.

"It was a plumber who was working under the house on some pipes," Jason explained. "Can you tell me where you were today?"

Diana sighed and pointed to her crimson skin. "I fell asleep on the beach."

"I was swimming," Jim frowned. "We've been on the beach since after breakfast."

"Okay, and did you notice anyone suspicious around Dune House at any time during your stay?" he asked as he made a note.

"No one other than that strange fellow in the suit," Jim replied. "I saw him walking down to the beach and waved hello, but he just hurried off back towards the house."

"He wasn't suspicious, just different," Diana corrected him. "He just wasn't very friendly."

"So, is this a murder?" Jim pressed. "Should we be concerned about our safety?"

"No, there's no need for that," Jason said firmly. "This seems to have been a targeted crime, and there will be a police presence while we investigate."

"It's still pretty creepy," Diana whispered.

"I understand," Suzie nodded. "I'm sure this was not what you expected to happen on your weekend away, however it has happened and I am sure that the police will get to the bottom of it. I would like to offer you a complimentary stay at some point in the future, if you would be interested."

"Well," Jim said slowly. "It's not your fault this happened. No one can predict these things."

As the couple walked down the hall towards their room Suzie felt some relief that they had not been as difficult as Alice.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

There was only one guest left for Jason to speak to. Hopefully, he would prove more obliging than Alice but Suzie doubted that that would be the case.

“I still have to speak with Martin Cotes,” Jason said as he turned to Suzie. “Any idea where he might be?”

“As far as I know he hasn't left his room,” Suzie replied. “He didn't show up for lunch today. Other than Jim and Diana seeing him outside, I haven't heard of anyone seeing him.”

“That's a little odd isn't it?” Jason asked thoughtfully.

“He is a little odd,” Suzie pointed out. “He brought all kinds of equipment with him, I'm not sure what it's for. I assumed he's working on some kind of project.”

“Well, let's go and see if he's in his room,” Jason suggested. The two walked towards the room that was still closed up tight. Mary came down the stairs as they did.

“Ben is beside himself,” she said with a sigh. “He's never seen anything like this before.”

“I'll need to talk to him, too,” Jason said quickly. “But we can give him a few minutes to regain his composure.”

“Good, thank you, Jason,” Mary said. Jason and Suzie continued on to Martin’s room.

When Suzie and Jason got to Martin’s room Suzie felt a bit uneasy. She could not believe that someone had been murdered at Dune house. She steadied her breath as Jason knocked heavily on the door to Martin's room. When he received no answer he tried the handle.

“It's locked,' he said. “Suzie, do you have a key to the room?”

“I do,” she nodded. “But do you think it's right to barge in?”

“Well, with one person dead on the property we need to make

sure at the very least that everyone is accounted for and not hurt."

"You're right," Suzie nodded. She reached into her pocket and retrieved a small key ring. She stepped past Jason and slid a key into the door knob. She turned it and twisted the knob at the same time. As the door swung open she braced herself. She had no idea what they might find inside. Would Martin be hurt or worse? Would he even be inside?

"Excuse me, Mr. Cotes?" Jason called out as he stepped in behind Suzie. It was clear that he was there, as he was sitting at the small table with a pair of headphones on. That explained why he hadn't answered the door, he could not hear the knock. When he glanced up to see Suzie and Jason standing inside the door he jumped.

"What are you doing in here?" Martin demanded. "I asked not to be disturbed."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Cotes, but this police officer needs to ask you a few questions. There was a murder on the property."

"That's terrible," he said as he edged closer towards the equipment piled on the floor.

"What's all this?" Jason asked.

"It's just some things I brought along with me," Martin shrugged. "Beach combing, that kind of thing."

Suzie raised an eyebrow. She wondered how he could have been beach combing if he had rarely left the room.

"Ah, I see," Jason nodded but he was still looking skeptically at the equipment. "Well, all I need to know is where you were today."

"Oh I, well," Martin pushed his glasses further up. He looked over at Suzie, as if she might have the answer. "I was here, most of the day," he explained.

"Jim said he saw you out by the beach," Suzie volunteered. Jason shot her a dark look of warning. Suzie realized she might have overstepped the mark.

"Oh right, yes, I was out on the beach, but only for a few minutes. It's just so hot," he added.

"Can you tell me if you noticed anyone else around the building? Or maybe out on the beach?" Jason asked.

"I did see that other woman that's staying here. Alice I think her name is. She was poking all around the house," Martin explained. "I saw her looking under the porch and such. I thought it was a little odd."

“Thank you,” Jason said as he put away his notepad. “You've been very helpful.”

As they stepped out of the room, Jason turned to look at Suzie.

“You have to let me ask the questions, and let the guests answer on their own,” he said firmly.

“I'm sorry, Jason, I didn’t mean to interfere,” Suzie cringed at the thought of affecting one of Jason's investigations.

Mary walked towards them and stood silently in the hall, looking between the two.

“I know,” he nodded, but his expression was still dark. “I'm going to check in with the department and make sure we can get a rush on the forensics. The body should be removed soon.”

Suzie closed her eyes at the mention of 'the body'. “Poor Doug,” she said softly. Mary gave Suzie's shoulder a light squeeze.

“Yes,” Jason nodded. “Oh Mary, can you have Ben meet me at the station when he’s ready so I can ask him some questions?”

“I'll let him know,” Mary promised. Jason returned to the other officers investigating the scene. Mary grimaced as she guided Suzie towards the dining room.

“This is some mess we have on our hands,” Suzie sighed

“It sure is,” Mary agreed. “From the sound of it, there are no suspects. But who could have killed Doug? It makes no sense!”

“Martin said something about Alice snooping around. Why would she be doing that if she had nothing to do with this?” Suzie asked.

“That's a good point,” Mary agreed. “She must be up to something. But I have a hard time believing that she would sneak under the house.”

“Maybe, but she was laying it on pretty thick, wasn't she? With her spoiled attitude? Maybe it was all a farce to throw us off,” Suzie suggested.

“You know we could say the same about anyone,” Mary sighed. “I think the key to all of this, is why. Why did someone kill the plumber? If someone had a personal vendetta, there were plenty of easier ways to handle it. Why would they wait until they had to crawl under a house to do it?”

“Maybe that's it,” Suzie suddenly gasped. “What if it has nothing to do with the plumber?”

“What are you talking about, Suzie?” Mary shook her head. “Of course it's about the plumber, he's the one that's dead.”

“But think about it,” Suzie said quickly. “Someone was trying to get under the house before the plumber ever arrived.”

“So, if it wasn't about the plumber, if the plumber just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, then what was it about?” Mary said softly. “I mean, there is nothing under Dune House but pipes.”

“Remember that Doug said it looked like someone had intentionally damaged the pipe. We thought maybe it was one of the locals,” Suzie said as she sat back in her chair. “But now that I think about it, I don't think anyone local would have done this. Why go to all the trouble of damaging a pipe when they could have just broken windows or even started a fire?”

“You're right,” Mary nodded. “So, why would someone have damaged the pipes on purpose?”

“Here's the thing,” Suzie said in a whisper. “At this point it could have been anyone. The key is knowing exactly what they might have been doing under the house.”

“If it wasn't intentional sabotage, then it must have been something else,” Mary narrowed her eyes. “For someone to go to all the trouble of risking getting caught, as well as killing another person, then they must have had a very good reason for going under the house.”

“I think we should do a little research,” Suzie suggested. “Maybe there is something about Dune House that we don't know.”

Mary's eyes widened. “You know, Ben said he thought he saw someone walking around the house. But when he went outside no one was there. Maybe that person went under the house,” her face paled with fear. “To think that my son could have been that close to a murderer.”

“I'm sorry, Mary. That must be a terrible thought,” Suzie grimaced. “But I think you're right. Ben did see someone, and that person probably did go under the house. So, even before our guests arrived, something strange was going on here.”

“If it's none of the guests, then it had to be someone local. We need to get to the bottom of this,” she said sternly.

“Yes, we do,” Suzie agreed. “I know just the person to ask.”

“You do?” Mary asked with surprise.

“Louis, the librarian,” Suzie said. “He knows more about this little town, and this house, than either of us put together.”

“Why don't you pay him a visit, and I'll stay here to look after

the guests?" Mary suggested. "I want to talk to Ben about what he saw, and let him know that he needs to meet Jason at the police station."

"Are you sure?" Suzie asked. "I don't want to leave you with too much to handle."

"Don't worry about me," Mary insisted. "I can handle it," she said with confidence. Suzie was sure Mary could handle it, but she wasn't sure if she would be able to handle finding out the truth about Dune House. What if one of its secrets was so terrible that she wouldn't be able to continue to live in it?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

As Suzie drove towards the library she wished that Paul was on land. He would help her sort through things. He was very intelligent, something that Suzie respected deeply about him. But he was out at sea, and likely wouldn't be back until the next day. So, she had no choice but to try to piece things together herself. She parked in the nearly empty parking lot and walked up to the library. There were a few people inside, but not too many. The librarian behind the desk smiled at her as she walked in.

“Hi Louis,” Suzie smiled.

“Hi Suzie,” Louis said. “How is opening weekend going?”

“Oh well, it's going,” Suzie said casually. She didn't want the whole town knowing about the murder just yet. “I was wondering if I could tap into some of your knowledge about Garber's history.”

“Anything for you,” he said with a slight smile. Suzie wasn't sure if he meant it, but she was happy he was willing to help her.

“What can you tell me about the history of Dune House, anything that involves something under the house?” Suzie asked hopefully.

“There is so much history with Dune House,” Louis said as he pulled his glasses off and began to polish them with the hem of his shirt. “But as for something being under it,” he hummed thoughtfully and put his glasses back on. “I only know of one thing involving that.”

“What?” Suzie asked, trying not to hold her breath.

“Well, a long time ago just as the civil war was moving through the area, Dune House was supposed to be used as the governor's mansion. It was renovated and filled to the hilt with luxuries. Unfortunately, before the governor could even move into it, the civil war shifted and fighting began in Garber.”

“Oh,” Suzie said with a slight shake of her head. She was trying to be attentive but she didn't see how any of that had anything to do with something under the house.

“In the midst of all the fighting, a few of the governor's men were rumored to have made an effort to protect his riches. They piled everything of value into a solid chest and buried it under the house. Supposedly, gold, jewels, even a rare painting or two. For a little while after the fighting moved on, it became like a local fable. The riches by the sea. But no one dared to look for it, because the governor still owned the house and he threatened to murder anyone who stepped on his property. There were rumors of a few people attempting to search for the riches, but they didn’t turn up anything.”

“So, no one ever found the valuables?” Suzie asked with surprise. “It could still be under there?”

“Of course not,” Louis laughed. “If there was gold, it was found, I can promise you that.”

“How do you know?” Suzie asked.

“The house changed hands a few years later. They renovated the house again, and did their best to repair all of the damage that had been done by the fighting. The rumor persisted for a little while, before it just died out.”

“Huh,” Suzie said thoughtfully. “And that's the only information you have about something hidden under the house?”

“Yes, no buried bodies, no secrets,” he shrugged.

“That must be it then,” Suzie said softly. “Someone was trying to find that gold.”

“Well, that would be a pipe dream, I mean think about it. If it was the governor's men who hid the gold, the governor would have demanded they retrieve it,” he explained. “The pipes in that old place had to have been redone at least three times. I'm sure that someone would have stumbled across hidden money if it was still there.”

Suzie nodded. “Thank you, Louis, you've been very helpful.”

“Well, I try,” he smiled. “Now, as to the other stories about Dune House...”

“Another day,” Suzie said with a polite smile. “I have to get back to my guests. Thank you again, Louis.”

“Anytime,” he nodded as he turned back to the pile of magazines he had been sorting through.

Suzie's mind was spinning as she drove back to Dune House. She was now very suspicious of one guest in particular. When she arrived Mary was sweeping the front porch. There was no sign of any of the guests.

“Where is everyone?” Suzie asked as she hurried up onto the porch.

“Alice went into town, Jim and Diana took a pamphlet for the local museum,” Mary replied and rested the broom against the outside wall of the house.

“And Martin?” Suzie asked, narrowing her eyes. “Have you seen him?”

“As far as I know he's still in his room,” Mary shrugged.

“I think we need to be very careful about that,” Suzie said. “I think he's the one that was under the house.”

“What? Why do you think that?” Mary asked with a frown.

“Because there was once a rumor that there was gold and other valuables hidden under the house,” Suzie explained. “With all of that equipment that he had I bet he was using that to figure out exactly where the gold might be hidden.”

“Do you think he was involved with Doug's murder?” Mary asked in a hushed voice.

“I don't know,” Suzie replied nervously. “But I think that we need to be extra cautious around him.”

“Have you spoken to Jason about it?” she asked as she stepped closer to Suzie.

“Spoken to me about what?” Jason asked as he stepped out of his patrol car. Suzie was startled by his sudden presence as she hadn't even heard the car pull up. Ben was with him, and climbed the steps up to the porch to stand next to his mother.

“I'll let her tell you,” Mary said as she looked over at Ben. “I want to talk to you in private, please.”

Ben raised an eyebrow as if he was instinctively wondering if he was in trouble. Once Mary and Ben had stepped off the porch and into the house Suzie turned to face Jason.

“I need to talk to you about Martin Cotes,” she said quickly. Jason held up a hand to silence her.

“Listen Suzie, I found out some information about Alice Montreal,” Jason said as he leaned back against the porch railing.

“What is it?” Suzie asked curiously. “Does she have a criminal past?”

“No, not criminal,” he replied. “She runs a B & B in the next town.”

“What?” Suzie asked with surprise. “She must have come here to check out the competition.”

“Must have,” Jason agreed. “It doesn't make her a killer.”

“No, it doesn't,” Suzie agreed. “But she might have been the one that damaged the pipe in the first place. Maybe she went under the house to cause more problems and Doug caught her. If he did, then maybe she panicked.”

“It's possible,” Jason said and cringed. “But she doesn't look like she's ever had a trace of dirt on her. Somehow it's hard for me to believe that she wiggled her way under the house.”

“Ah Jason,” Suzie said sweetly. “You're still young. Just because a woman is pretty, doesn't mean she's not capable of terrible things.”

“I know that,” Jason said gruffly and then rubbed his chin slowly. “But it still doesn't quite add up to me.”

“We might not know exactly who yet, but I have another idea as to why,” Suzie said. “I visited the library today to talk to Louis about the history of Dune House. He told me a story about gold and other valuables being hidden under the house during the civil war. I believe that whoever went under the house went under looking for that gold.”

“Well, that's a theory,” Jason said hesitantly. “But that was so long ago. Who would even have that knowledge?”

“Maybe Martin Cotes,” she pointed out. “He knew that the bannister on the porch was not the original. He seemed very interested in the history of the house. He also has strange tools and equipment in his room.”

“Plenty of people will stay here because they are interested in the history of the house, and those that do will probably know some of the history of the house. Besides, Martin explained to us that he was using the equipment on the beach for beach combing. Do you know how many tourists and locals do the same thing?” he shook his head. “That's not enough reason to suspect a man of murder.”

Suzie nodded. “I guess you're right. I was a little quick to judge. It would make a lot more sense if this was simple competition issues with another B & B. Alice was poking around the outside of the house. She probably damaged the pipe to make us look bad. Maybe she was under the house to do more damage when the plumber

caught her."

"It is a solid lead for right now. I want to see if I can catch up with her," he suggested.

"Yes, I'd love to see what she has to say for herself," Suzie said. As they walked into the house, Suzie could hear Ben and Mary talking in the kitchen. It sounded like Mary was warning him about Martin. Suzie made a mental note to speak to her about Alice. Just as she had the thought Alice walked in through the front door. She glanced between Jason and Suzie and then walked past them.

Suzie moved to chase after her, but Jason held her back.

"Wait, give her a moment. I don't want to spook her."

"But she might not come back out of her room," Suzie pointed out impatiently.

"She will, she's too curious not to," Jason said with confidence. Jason's cell phone rang, "I have to get this," he said as he walked towards the front door.

After a few minutes Jason still hadn't returned and Alice was back dressed in her bathing suit and walking casually towards the side door that led to the beach.

Suzie didn't want the opportunity to pass as she wanted to talk to her.

"Alice," she said firmly. "Can I talk to you for a second, please?"

"I don't have time to talk," Alice smiled sweetly and attempted to dodge around Suzie.

"It will only take a minute," Suzie said as Alice tried to slip passed her to head out to the beach.

"What?" Alice asked as she glared at Suzie.

"I know who you are, Alice," Suzie said calmly.

"I should hope so," Alice replied. "I'm your guest."

"You run a B & B of your own, don't you?"

Alice frowned. "So, what if I do?"

"So, maybe you came here to see what Dune House offered," Suzie pointed out.

"And?" Alice asked and flipped her long, dark hair. "That's not a crime the last time I checked."

"No, it isn't," Suzie agreed. Suzie saw Jason walk back into Dune House and straight over to Alice.

"I haven't heard from your lawyer yet, Ms. Montreal," Jason said in a stern voice. "Maybe it's time you really called one. Because there is evidence building up that you might have had something to

do with this and if you didn't I imagine you would want to clear your name."

"Well, the evidence that you're both certifiably insane is building up pretty fast as well," she growled as she glared at both of them.

"Are you denying that you are here because I am your competition?" Suzie asked.

"Ha, you think this is competition?" she demanded. "You have no idea what you're talking about. My bed and breakfast is beautiful. It has a hot tub, it has breakfast in bed, this place is a dingy old dump compared to it," she said arrogantly as she turned on her heel and pranced out onto the beach, as if she didn't have a care in the world.

"Why didn't you arrest her?" Suzie looked over at Jason

"I don't have enough evidence," he said in a low voice. "I have to let her go."

"I can't believe you just let her go," Suzie said with frustration.

"Suzie, I can't just arrest everyone I see," Jason countered with reflected irritation.

"Can you arrest a murderer?" she demanded.

"What's all this shouting about?" Martin asked from the hallway.

Suzie fell silent as she turned to look in his direction. Jason looked towards him as well. Martin stood perfectly still in the entrance of the hallway. Now, that Suzie had another look at him, he really did seem harmless. Dressed carefully in his fancy suit, he didn't look like the type to go digging around underneath a house. Her eyes dropped down to his shoes, where she noticed no trace of dirt caked on them. In fact his shoes looked spotless.

"Sorry, to have disturbed you, Martin," Suzie said calmly.

"Well, it's hard not to be disturbed when I hear all of this shouting and carrying on," Martin said grimly. "First you violate my privacy by coming into my room with a police officer. Now, I can't even do my research in peace."

"What research would that be?" Jason asked, not bothered by the man's accusations.

"I don't have to tell you that," Martin said stubbornly.

"No, of course you don't," Suzie said with a short laugh. "It's not like you're under investigation or something. But we were just curious what you have been up to. It must be something very interesting for you to spend so much of your time on it."

“Well,” Martin sighed. “If you must know, I am working on very interesting research. I am trying to study the level of metals in the sand at area beaches. People never discuss the dangers of sand, but they should. If the heavy metals are in the sand, then they are in our environment much more frequently than we believe.”

“That's impressive,” Suzie said.

“I have never thought about that,” Mary added quietly. Ben nodded beside her.

“There's nothing wrong with Garber sand,” Jason said defensively. “We've always kept the beach pristine.”

“Always?” Martin asked. “Even after the civil war when most of the town was burned to the ground? Do you really think people were concerned about what was tossed or leaked into the water then?”

Suzie tensed at the mention of the civil war. If he knew about the civil war moving through Garber then he likely had read about the gold that was rumored to be hidden there. But his explanation about testing the sand explained his equipment.

“Maybe not,” Jason said quietly. “But the water is tested frequently to ensure its safety.”

“And the sand?” Martin pressed. “When was the last time that you had the sand tested?”

“No one has ever tested the sand,” Jason admitted. “That I know of.”

“Well, then you can see how important my research is,” Martin said with confidence. “No one thinks things through. If the sand is part of our eco-system, it matters. It impacts animals, humans, food supply, everything you can think of.”

“I guess it's a good thing that you're testing it then,” Jason said calmly. “It's a lot better than what I've known treasure hunters to do to the beach. They like to dig holes looking for gold,” he paused at that and seemed to be studying Martin's face intently.

“There is nothing worse than a misguided treasure hunter,” Martin announced with disgust in his voice. “If any of them knew the truth, that the only treasure we have is this earth, then they wouldn't waste so much time trying to find gold,” he shook his head.

Suzie bit into her bottom lip. She glanced over at Mary, who looked over at Ben. Suzie was finding Martin less and less suspicious by the moment.

“I'd have to agree with you there,” Jason admitted as his gaze lingered on Martin. His expression was stolid, not revealing a hint of what he was thinking or feeling.

“How can you test the sand if you never leave your room?” Suzie questioned.

“Oh,” Martin cleared his throat. “Well, I got a sample when I first arrived and I’ve been doing tests on it using the equipment in my room ever since.”

“Oh, okay,” Suzie said casually but she noticed that Martin looked a bit nervous.

“If you'll excuse me, I need to get back to my research,” he said sternly.

“Of course. We'll try not to disturb you again,” Suzie said apologetically.

“Please, try your hardest,” Martin requested with a bite to his words. Then he turned and calmly walked back to his room. He shut his door with a sharp slam.

Mary looked over at Suzie. “I don't think that this is going well,” she said with a sigh. “Is it good business to have your guests suspected of murder?”

“I don't think so,” Ben cringed.

“Well, we have to get to the bottom of this,” Suzie said with exasperation. “The guests will all be leaving soon, and that might just include the murderer.”

“Suzie, I need to speak with you for a moment,” Jason said. Then he nodded to Mary and Ben. “Ben, I'll meet you tonight, okay?”

“Yes, I'll be there,” Ben nodded.

As Suzie and Jason stepped back out on the porch, he ran a hand across his face and sighed.

“Are you okay, Jason?” Suzie asked.

“Not really,” he said as he shook his head. “I need you to stop interrogating the guests.”

“I know I’m sorry, Jason,” Suzie said. “I just wanted to confront Alice about spying.”

“I know,” he nodded. “I feel like I'm getting nowhere fast on this case, and you're right, I'm running out of time.”

“Well, it’s not an easy case,” Suzie said kindly,

“But it should be open and shut,” Jason insisted. “I'm under a lot of pressure to get this solved. Doug worked a few towns over but a

lot of the residents here knew him. My boss wants this solved, yesterday. But I don't want to rush the investigation, make a wrong move and end up letting the killer go free or worse, arresting an innocent person."

"You'll find the culprit," Suzie said with confidence.

"So far I have a murder with zero credible suspects and no evidence," Jason sighed and scratched his head. "I've been focusing mainly on the guests at Dune House, but really it could have been anyone in Garber at the time. Maybe it wasn't even one of the guests. Sure we suspected Alice, but she has a plausible reason for her behavior, as does Martin. I've only got Jim and Diana left, and they seem like harmless people."

"They do," Suzie agreed. "But I am sure it has to be either Alice or Martin."

"Except I have zero evidence to support either accusation," Jason pointed out morosely.

"Wait, you do have one piece of evidence," Suzie pointed out. "The shovel."

"Oh yes," he nodded. "And that will be great once we have a suspect. The blood on it belonged to the victim. There were no usable fingerprints. It looked almost brand new but it is useless to us."

"That's not very helpful is it?" Suzie sighed.

"No and James from Winston's has been away the last couple of days so I couldn't ask him if Doug bought the shovel, his assistant couldn't help us at all, he wasn't working the day Doug went in there, presuming that he even did. I don't expect it to be much help once I speak to him anyway," Jason explained. James was the owner of Winston's the hardware store in town. It always had some kind of sale happening. Suzie had loved going there while she was fixing up Dune House. "Anyway, I better head off. I'm going to check on some of the forensic evidence to see if they've come up with any hint as to who was under the house," Jason said.

"You're doing a good job, Jason, keep it up."

He looked up at Suzie, a little startled by her words. "Thanks Suzie," he said. "I just hope I find the murderer quickly."

She nodded as he walked towards his car.

When Jason had left Suzie looked out over the water thinking about the shovel. Why would a plumber need a shovel under the house? The pipes are not under the ground. What could he have

needed it for?

She decided to go and see if James, who she had come to know quite well, was back at work and remembered who had bought it. It was probably Doug who had bought it but maybe it was his murderer.

The town was bustling and Suzie had to navigate to find a parking spot near Winston's which was located on the main strip of town. All of the small stores were connected by one roof on each block and very few had their own parking lots. She finally found a place to park, and hoped that the store wouldn't already be closed. Luckily the door was still unlocked when she reached it. When she walked into the store she smiled at James.

“Hi there, Suzie,” he said as he walked around the counter to greet her.

“How was your time off?” she asked politely.

“Great, I was away at my cabin,” he replied. “It is good to see you again. How is everything at Dune House?”

“Well, we're in a bit of a crisis,” Suzie admitted. “I was hoping that you could help me with something.”

“What is it?” he asked curiously.

Suzie glanced down the aisle that sold digging tools. “Do you have any shovels for sale?”

“Plenty,” he nodded and led her down the aisle. Suzie spotted the shovel that had been recovered at the scene. It looked identical to the murder weapon.

“Do you remember selling one of these shovels to anyone lately?” Suzie asked hopefully.

“Ah, well,” he narrowed his eyes slightly. “It's hard to say, I honestly don't always pay attention.”

“Maybe you could check your records,” Suzie suggested. “Your

receipts?”

“Actually,” he took the shovel from Suzie. “I know for sure I sold at least one. I'm just not sure if I sold more than one.”

“Do you remember who you sold it to?” Suzie asked eagerly. “Do you have security cameras?”

“No, I don't have cameras. I don't like those new-fangled things. I think you should give people the benefit of the doubt, not videotape them just for walking through your door,” he sighed. “But I do remember who I sold it to. Yes, now it's coming back to me. The man who bought this type of shovel was dressed funny. He said he was staying at Dune House. It just struck me as odd, because if you're staying at a B & B why would you need a shovel?”

Suzie bit her tongue instead of telling him exactly what he had needed it for. So, it was Martin who had bought the shovel. The murder weapon.

“Yes, strange fellow, it was about three days ago,” he continued.

“Wait, three days ago?” Suzie asked. That was before Martin had arrived at Dune House. “Are you sure about that?”

“Yup, I'm sure,” he nodded. “I’ve been away since then and I wouldn't forget that guy for anything.”

“Was that all he bought?” Suzie asked.

“No, actually he also bought a pair of those slipcovers that go over your shoes to protect carpets. I have no idea what he was planning on using those for. Was he working in your garden or something?” he asked.

“No, but thank you for this information,” Suzie said with a grim frown. As she turned to leave the hardware store, she knew once and for all that Martin was her main suspect. Now the only question was, would she be able to find him and stop him before he killed again?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

When Suzie returned to Dune House, she had an eerie feeling. Martin's dusty car was still parked in the driveway. She pulled out her cell phone and placed a call to Jason.

“Suzie,” Jason answered. Suzie decided that she was going to have to bend the truth a bit so it didn’t look like she was stepping on Jason’s toes.

“I went to Winston’s to pick something up today and I happened to ask him about the shovel,” Suzie said quickly before Jason could interrupt her. “I found out that the shovel was sold three days ago to Martin Cotes. I'm standing outside Dune House right now, and his car is still here. Can you get here soon?”

“I'll be there in a few minutes. Don't go into the house until I get there,” he warned.

“But Mary is in there,” Suzie argued.

“If you can get her attention, get her to come out, otherwise you're just going to have to sit tight until I get there. It will be much more dangerous if Martin suspects we're onto him. So just try to be casual. If you see him, keep your distance and be polite.”

“I'll try,” Suzie said fretfully. After she hung up the phone she tried to follow Jason's instructions. She really did. But all she kept thinking of was whether Martin might already have hurt Mary, or if she could be hurt before Jason arrived. Finally, she couldn't wait any longer. She crept up the steps and onto the porch. She slipped inside the house as quietly as she could. She spotted Mary in the kitchen washing some dishes.

“Mary,” she hissed.

Mary looked up and over at Suzie. Her eyes narrowed as she studied her strange expression.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Come outside with me,” Suzie said and gestured to the door.

“I just have a few dishes to finish up,” she said and turned the water back on.

“No, Mary, no, come with me now,” Suzie insisted and started walking across the dining room towards her. Just then Suzie heard a door in the hallway open. Her heart skipped a beat. She locked eyes with Mary. Mary could now clearly see the fear in Suzie's eyes.

“Suzie, what's wrong?” she asked as she moved towards her.

“Yes, Suzie what's wrong?” a voice asked from the hallway. Suzie spun on her heel to face the voice. It was a relief to see that it was Alice.

“Alice, I suggest you go out on the town today,” Suzie said quickly. Then she grabbed Mary's hand. “Let's go outside ladies, it's such a nice day.”

In the distance Suzie heard a scraping sound. She couldn't be sure if it was coming from inside or outside the house.

“That's already what I was planning to do, but thanks for the tip,” Alice said with a roll of her eyes. “You get stranger every time I see you.”

Suzie ignored her words. All she cared about was getting the two of them out of the house before Martin emerged from his room, if he was even in there in the first place.

“Let's go outside now,” she said in what she hoped was a cheerful voice. If Martin was listening in, she didn't want him to think that there was a problem. As she made her way towards the front door, she heard the scraping sound again. She still wasn't sure what the sound was, but she wasn't going to hang around to find out. Just as they stepped out onto the porch Jason's patrol car was pulling into the driveway. He jumped out of the car and jogged across the driveway to meet them at the bottom of the porch.

“I told you not to go inside,” Jason barked sharply and gestured for them to move away from the porch.

“What is all of this about?” Alice demanded. “You know what, never mind,” she shook her head. “I'm out of here.”

She walked to her car and drove off ignoring the entire situation. Jason pulled out his radio to call for backup.

“We need to get in there and see if he's there,” Suzie insisted. “If we wait for backup he could be long gone by the time they get here.”

“I'll go in,” Jason said firmly. “You two stay out here,” he looked

from Mary to Suzie and back again. “I mean it.”

“We will,” Mary assured him. But Suzie didn't say a word. As soon as Jason stepped through the door into Dune House, Suzie was on the move. She was afraid that if Jason went in through the front door, then Martin would go out through the side door. She ran around the porch to the side of the house.

“Suzie, where are you going?” Mary demanded as she chased after her.

“Look,” Suzie said as she pointed to the window of Martin's room. It looks like someone has pushed the screen out.

“He's not in here,” Jason said as he opened the window. “We must have missed him.”

“Now what?” Suzie frowned as she waited for Jason to make his way back out of the house.

“Now, we have to figure out where he might have gone,” Jason said as he glanced towards the beach.

“His car is still here,” Mary pointed out.

“And all of his fancy equipment is still in his room,” Jason frowned.

“Maybe we missed something under the house,” Suzie said with a slight frown. “There has to be some clue or evidence there that was overlooked. Maybe there will be a clue of where he is. He must have been sneaking out the window all of this time that we thought he was holed up in his room. That's why the note that Mary left was pushed halfway out from under the door. The breeze from the window being opened must have made it scoot. He purchased footies to go over his shoes at the hardware store, too. He must have done that to keep from tracking dirt and sand into the room, so that we'd have no idea what he was up to,” she sighed. “He really covered his bases. But I'm willing to bet if he was foolish enough to leave the shovel under the house after killing Doug that he left something else behind, too.”

“It's possible,” Jason admitted and adjusted his gun belt. “It is a tight space under there. I'll take a second look.”

“I can't believe he just took off and left some of his equipment behind,” Mary said. “It seemed so important to him when he arrived. Maybe he didn't leave at all.”

“But if he didn't leave, where is he?” Suzie asked. “His car is still here. Where could he be hiding?”

“Wait a minute,” Jason frowned. “If Martin is our prime suspect,

then it's possible that he is still looking for that gold. If he wanted it so badly that it drove him to kill someone, would he really be willing to abandon the idea of finding it?"

"It's worth a look," Mary said nervously.

"It would be a huge risk for him to take," Suzie pointed out.

"True," Jason argued. "He couldn't have gone far. He probably felt very confident about throwing us off his scent with that speech about contaminated sand. He might have taken another chance," he lowered his voice. "He could still very well be underneath Dune House."

"Let's find out," Suzie said boldly. Mary nodded her agreement.

"I guess it would do no good to ask you two to stay here out of harm's way?" Jason asked grimly.

"You can always ask," Suzie said sweetly. Mary only shook her head.

"Fine, you can come with me, but stay back from the house. If Martin is down there, he's going to be desperate when he is caught," he frowned and adjusted his gun in the holster. Suzie noticed that he made sure that the strap that secured it was loosened.

Carefully the three of them walked around to the side of the house. Jason put his finger to his lips, motioning for them to be as quiet as possible. It was clear that someone had been there recently as the pile of dirt that had been removed in order to give the police easier access to the space had been disturbed and the crime scene tape had been torn. Jason crouched down slowly, doing his best to be silent. Suzie and Mary stayed close together as Jason peered into the opening.

He glanced back over his shoulder at Mary and Suzie. His eyebrow raised and he gave a slight nod. He reached down and turned off his radio to make sure he could move in total quiet. As he crept beneath the house he drew his gun.

"Don't move!" he barked out. Suzie and Mary looked at each other and braced themselves for a potential gunshot. "Stop!" Jason shouted. They could hear scuffling and groaning from under the house.

Suzie stood near the edge of the entrance. She wondered if she should go inside to help or not. A moment later Jason backed out from under the house, dragging Martin with him. Martin was already handcuffed.

“How did you do that?” Suzie asked, obviously impressed.

Martin was sputtering dirt from his mouth and it looked as if Jason had given him a solid punch to the side of his face.

Jason was out of breath as he held tightly to Martin. It was clear that they had wrestled quite a bit below the house.

“I don't know to be honest,” Jason gasped out. “But it's done.”

“What are you doing!” Martin exclaimed.

“You’re under arrest,” Jason said breathlessly.

“For what?” Martin questioned.

“For murder!” Jason explained.

“But I didn’t do anything,” Martin raised his voice.

“We know that you purchased the shovel,” Jason said. “The murder weapon.”

“So what?” he said with a shrug.

“Well, why would you need a shovel and be snooping around a crime scene?” Jason asked. Martin seemed lost for words as he was contemplating what to say next. His eyes seemed to sparkle as something occurred to him.

“Oh, all right,” Martin said as he sighed. “But, I'm this close to finding a fortune. This can just be between us,” he offered. “I'll share the gold with all of you.”

Suzie, Mary and Jason stared at him in astonishment. He wasn’t just weird he was loony.

“Why did you murder him?” Jason asked trying to get as much information from him before he declined his offer of sharing the gold. Martin seemed to think that they were still going to accept the offer.

“I didn’t mean to,” Martin replied matter-of-factly. “I was looking for the gold, our gold,” he said with a smile. “I accidently damaged the pipe and then when I was looking for it again Doug came down and saw me. He wanted to know what I was doing and when I told him he said he was going to tell the police.”

“So you decided to kill him,” Jason said in astonishment.

“I had no choice. I offered to share it with him but he didn’t want a bar of it,” Martin explained. “I couldn’t let all my hard work be for nothing. I was so close. I am so close.”

“You did a terrible thing, for nothing. There's no gold under that house. There hasn't been gold under there for decades. What was there was either found or moved. You killed someone for nothing,” Jason said in disbelief.

“What?” Martin stammered out. “But I've done my research. I know that it's true. I've looked into it for years.”

“You were wrong,” Suzie said sternly. “And you took the life of a good man because of it.”

Martin fell silent. His glasses were smudged with dirt and had slid down nearly to the tip of his nose. Suzie couldn't feel anything but disgust for a man who would trade someone's life for the potential of riches. Jason led him towards the squad car. Once he had Martin secured in the backseat he pulled out his radio and summoned backup to assist with the gathering of evidence. Suzie and Mary remained beside the house, both settled into a quiet state of shock.

“What could possess a man to desire riches so deeply?” Suzie asked softly.

“When you give your life to something you believe it's the most important thing,” Mary shook her head. “He lost sight of reality, I'd guess.”

Suzie shook her head and drew a deep breath of the salt-laced air. “I just don't understand.”

“We're not supposed to,” Mary said gently and curled her arm around Suzie's shoulders. “Unfortunately, there are things we will never be able to understand.”

“Maybe fortunately,” Suzie pointed out as they ascended the steps onto the porch. “Who wants to be able to understand something like that?”

“I'll make us some tea,” Mary offered. “You sit on the porch, look out over the water, it will help.”

Suzie smiled with gratitude and made her way onto the porch. The opening weekend of Dune House had been hectic, but it was still the most beautiful place to be, according to Suzie. The moment she set eyes on the expanse of blue water before her, she felt the soothing begin. No one could have stopped Doug’s murder. It was horrible, and senseless, and Mary was right, she thought, no one should ever be able to understand something like that.

As she looked out over the water she felt her heart expand. She was instinctively searching for the lights of Paul's boat. He had said he would be patient, but Suzie found herself wondering if that was what she really wanted. Why did she pull herself back from such a supportive and romantic relationship?

“Here you are,” Mary said as she set down a cup of tea in front

of Suzie. Suzie picked up the cup as Mary sat down across from her.

“This has been one eventful day,” Mary said softly.

“Yes, it has,” Suzie agreed.

“I'm going to meet Jason at the police station,” Ben said as he stepped out onto the porch. “Do you two need anything before I go?”

“No,” Suzie shook her head.

“Yes,” Mary grinned. “We need to know who Jason's girlfriend is.”

“Oh Mom,” Ben rolled his eyes and then kissed her lightly on the cheek. “I'll see what I can do.”

As he jumped down off the porch Mary and Suzie exchanged a long look.

“It's weird to see him all grown up,” Suzie giggled. “Does that mean we finally have to be grownups?”

“I don't know about you, but I have no interest in any of that,” Mary smiled warmly.

As they talked Jim and Diana stepped up onto the porch.

“Thanks for telling us about Cheney's,” Jim said. “It was delicious.”

“When we mentioned we were staying at Dune House, the owner thought you might like this,” Diana said as she held out a take-home bag.

Suzie tried not to blush. “Well, I do like pasta,” she said with a laugh.

“I noticed the police are no longer here,” Jim said. “Is everything settled?”

“Yes,” Suzie nodded.

“Good,” he smiled and took his wife's hand to lead her inside.

“No need to tell them the whole truth,” Mary said softly. “There's nothing like knowing you were sharing a B & B with a killer to ruin a vacation.”

“Good point,” Suzie nodded. “I'm worn out, I'm going to bed.”

“Good night, Suzie,” Mary gave her a quick hug before sitting back down at the table. “I'm just going to look at the water for a bit longer.”

Suzie studied her for a long moment. She knew that her friend had been through a lot. All of the activity at Dune House had probably made it impossible for her to spend any real time with Ben.

“Are you sure you're okay, Mary?” Suzie asked as she laid a hand lightly on her friend's shoulder.

“Yes, Suzie,” she smiled. “Even with all of this chaos, even with all of the uncertainty of opening a B & B, this is still the happiest I've been. I like the adventure, even if I'm just along for the ride.”

“Well, something tells me this won't be the last adventure we share,” Suzie said with a slightly bitter laugh.

“With the two of us together, you can never predict,” Mary said with a slight smile.

As Suzie walked off to bed she felt herself beginning to relax once more. Dune House was still Dune House, as beautiful and meaningful as it had always been to her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

The next morning Suzie awoke with a sense of relief. Something terrible had happened, but at least the killer would be brought to justice. Suzie and Mary said goodbye to the guests who had made it through a dramatic weekend. None looked the worse for wear, other than Martin of course, who was sitting in a jail cell in handcuffs. Diana did still have quite a sunburn but she didn't seem too concerned about it. Jim assured Suzie that they would be back for their free weekend sometime soon. Alice slipped out as quickly as possible. Ever since she had been exposed as a spy she had kept her distance.

“The offer still stands for a free weekend, Alice,” Mary said as the woman tried to reach the door without being caught.

“Thanks, but I think next time I want a cold bath, I'll stay local,” she smirked at that and sauntered out the door. Suzie knew that Alice might give them bad reviews. She only hoped that they would have enough customers to combat the negative attention. After everyone was gone, Mary and Suzie collapsed on the large, fluffy couch and sighed at the same time.

“That was wild,” Suzie said with a shake of her head.

“It was more than wild, it was nuts,” Mary clarified.

“I agree,” Suzie nodded. “At least we don't have any more guests until next weekend. That should give us some time to get things straightened up, and to recover from this madness.”

“That's the truth,” Mary agreed and closed her eyes. “Now, I need to take Ben to the airport,” she sighed. “I'm going to miss him.”

“I know you will,” Suzie said. “I hope that he will come again soon.”

“I'm sure he will,” Mary grinned. “I think he liked being so close

to the beach."

"You know, we still haven't found out exactly who Jason is seeing," Suzie pointed out. "One more mystery to solve."

"Oh, I don't think it's too much of a mystery," Mary said with a small smile.

"What do you mean?" Suzie asked.

"I mean I saw the sparkle in his eyes when he looked at Dr. Rose," Mary explained.

"Dr. Rose? The medical examiner?" Suzie asked with surprise "I never thought of that."

"Well, apparently he did," Mary laughed a little. "Ben told me last night that Jason's girlfriend was beautiful, but had a creepy job. I think that confirms it."

"I guess it does," Suzie agreed as she tried to picture the two of them together.

"Do you want me to go with you two to the airport?" Suzie offered.

"No, I'm sure you'll be watching the water for a certain boat containing a certain captain," she smiled.

"Maybe," Suzie said loftily.

Mary laughed and pushed herself up off the couch. After saying goodbye to Ben, Suzie went about tidying up Dune House.

Suzie was wiping down the kitchen counters with some soft music playing behind her. Her mind had traveled back to her years as an investigative journalist. It had been very exciting to cover stories and to get to know people she never would have met otherwise. However, now she felt as if she was still in the middle of that excitement, but she had Dune House to live in. The walls seemed to breathe secrets as she walked past them.

Dune House had been a source of fascination for locals for many years. Apparently it was also a source of fascination for others. Although the afternoon had been very quiet, she hoped that there would be a visit from Paul soon. She couldn't wait to see his beautiful gray shaded eyes. She still didn't know how to answer his question clearly, but she knew that she had to try. When she heard the front door of Dune House open, a smile began to creep up along her lips.

"Suzie?" Paul's slightly roughened voice called out. Suzie stepped out of the kitchen and met Paul in the dining room.

"Welcome back," she said smoothly as she looked into his eyes.

They were filled with concern.

“I heard about what happened, I'm sorry I couldn't get back faster,” he frowned as he took Suzie's hands in his and held them gently. “Are you okay?”

“I am now,” she replied and kissed him. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” he murmured as he let go of her hands and wrapped his arms around her waist instead. As he pulled her close to him he looked deeply into her eyes. “I'm sorry if I was pushing too hard.”

“You weren't,” she smiled fondly.

“I'm still patient,” he whispered and kissed her forehead lightly.

“You don't have to be,” she replied and kissed him again.

“So, I'm not a liar?” he asked as they both pulled back from the kiss, a smile playing on his lips.

“No, you're not a liar,” she replied with confidence in her voice. As they kissed again, Suzie felt the last of her resolve fading. Just as Paul coming home to dry land was his safe harbor, being wrapped up in his arms, had become hers.

The End

OceanofPDF.com

HIDDEN HIDEAWAYS

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 4

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

“Wait, don't!” Paul pleaded as he backed up across the sand. His eyes were wide with fear, and his hands were held out before him protectively.

“I'm sorry, Paul,” Suzie said as she tried to keep her voice calm. “But you asked for this. Now, you're going to have to accept the consequences.”

“Only if you can catch me!” he challenged and quirked an eyebrow. In the next moment he was running across the sand. Suzie couldn't help but shriek with laughter as she chased after him. She hadn't felt more like a little kid in years. She lengthened her strides, determined to tackle Paul and make him pay.

They had been out on the water most of the day. Paul was determined to get her alone as often as he could now. Suzie had made arrangements with Mary to keep an eye on Dune House, her stunning bed and breakfast, while she was gone. But she still felt a little guilty for having so much fun, when she was sure that Mary was back home toiling away with bed linens and dust rags.

One thing she did not feel guilty about was dumping an entire bucket of cold water all over the top of Paul's head.

“Hey!” he complained and groaned at the same time. “It’s not fair, I don't have much cover up there!”

She laughed at his reference to the fact that his thick, brown hair was gradually retreating along his scalp. She thought it added to his burly look, which she found to be incredibly attractive.

“It’s fair play,” Suzie teased him as she backed away from him giggling. Her own skirt was soaked through because he had decided to douse her with water a few minutes before. As they were enjoying the beach, they were surrounded only by nature. One of the best parts about going out on the boat with Paul was that he

knew all of the hidden hideaways. This beach in particular looked as if it hadn't seen a human footprint in years.

“That's it,” he said gruffly as he locked eyes with her. “This is war.”

“War?” Suzie gulped and started to run. Despite the fact that Paul was a rather brawny man, he was very light on his feet. He managed to catch up to her in three bouncing strides. When she felt his strong arms collide with her waist, a sharp thrill raced through her. He was careful to hold her close to keep her from crashing into the sand.

“Now, what will I do with you?” he whispered, his breath lingering close to her ear. Suzie had a few ideas. But before she could volunteer them, they both heard a strange sound that startled them out of their romantic trance.

“What was that?” Suzie wondered as she looked in the direction of the sound. It was similar to a woman crying, but it had just enough of a trill to it that it was clear it was an animal, not a person.

“Oh, that would be Bonnie Blue,” he said with a sigh. “She must be jealous.”

“Bonnie Blue?” Suzie asked as she unwound reluctantly from his arms. “Is that a friend of yours?”

“You could say that,” Paul smiled as he slipped his hand in hers. “We've known each other a long time.”

“Oh?” Suzie felt a little confused. She was beginning to wonder if Paul was talking about a real woman.

“You see, before I had the good luck of meeting you, I spent a lot of time alone,” he smiled as he led her towards a gathering of trees further down the beach. “In fact, I spent a lot of time here. It was a quiet place that I could anchor the boat and camp if I wanted. I just loved the fact that most people had no idea where I was.”

“I can understand that,” Suzie said with a slight nod. She had lived an adventurous life as an investigative reporter and there had been more than a few times when she wished she could just disappear. She smiled fondly at him as they stepped through the trees. It meant a lot to her that he would share his secret retreat with her.

“When I stayed here though, I wasn't alone. This crane became a part of my life. I tried to shoo her away, but she was quite insistent,” he laughed a little. “Eventually I just became accustomed

to her greeting me and hovering over me when I visited. I named her Bonnie Blue, because her feathers look almost blue in the right light," he explained.

"A crane?" Suzie grinned. She had started to get jealous over a bird. Then she caught sight of Bonnie Blue. The bird was quite regal as she perched on the precipice of a large rock that jutted up out of the water. The beach that surrounded Bonnie Blue was a beautiful one, with flawless, white sand. But what made it unique was the foliage that grew right up to its edge. There must have been enough fertile soil to support the bushes, flowers, and tall grass that stretched towards the sunny sky. It was truly one of the most stunning places that Suzie had ever observed. Bonnie Blue turned to look at Suzie. She released another mournful cry.

"She likes you," Paul said with pride.

"Oh, good," Suzie laughed. "I'd hate to see what she would do if she didn't like me."

"I like you," Paul said and gazed into her eyes lovingly. Their relationship was still fresh. They had only shared a few kisses, but they had been amazing. Suzie was still hesitant, she hadn't set out on this part of her life with the intention of finding romance, but Paul was more than just romance. He felt like the perfect fit for her. When he studied her so intently, preparing to kiss her, her heart sped up and she felt giddy. When he kissed her, Bonnie Blue let out a shrill cry and flew off across the sea.

"Hmm, she is jealous," Paul laughed as he broke the kiss.

"Well, she's going to have to come to terms with another woman being in your life," she said in a serious tone.

"I'm sure she'll come around," Paul murmured and stole another kiss. When Suzie pulled away and rested her head against his shoulder, he held her comfortably against him. She felt as if the day could not have been more perfect. She was quite far from the condo she had holed herself up in not long ago, and she had Dune House and her best friend Mary to thank for all of it.

Paul spread out a blanket on the sand and settled a picnic basket down in the middle of it. Suzie had packed it for their trip. As she began spreading out the food, Paul was busy sifting his fingers through the sand.

"Aren't you hungry?" Suzie asked as she looked over at him.

"Just a minute," he nodded. "I'm looking for something. Aha, here it is," he added as he pulled a seashell out of the sand. It was

perfectly rounded and rose shaded.

“It's beautiful,” Suzie said as she studied it intently.

“This beach is the only place I've ever found one like this,” Paul admitted. “It's for you,” he added as he handed it to her. “Might not be jewelry, but maybe you could turn it into a necklace or something,” he added shyly. Suzie had noticed the only thing that Paul seemed to be insecure about was his income. He lived by the sea, and if the sea wasn't in a generous mood, he didn't always make a lot. He had made a few comments about not being able to buy her the things he wanted to.

“It's priceless,” she replied honestly. She smiled and tucked it into her pocket. “But if I'm going to have one, then you have to have one, too,” she sifted through the sand until she found another slightly smaller shell.

“Here you go,” she smiled as she handed it to him. “Now we have a matching pair.”

“Wonderful,” he murmured as he looked into her eyes. He tucked the shell into his pocket and then shifted a little closer to her on the blanket. “Now, about being hungry,” he growled and moved to kiss her. Suzie stuck a roll between his lips before he could get too close.

“Good because I made plenty,” she laughed as he sputtered on the roll and then shook his head.

“Let's eat,” he said with a good natured smile and they shared their picnic, tossing a few crumbs here and there to Bonnie Blue who was standing guard.

The boat ride back to Dune House was smooth. Suzie leaned close to Paul as he steered the boat. She noticed he always stood tall at the helm, never a slouched shoulder in sight. She was sure that he was living his true passion. It was something that she admired about him, and something she was learning to do herself. Despite many years as an investigative reporter her real passion had always been design, interior decorating in particular. Converting the home she had inherited from her late Uncle Harry back into a bed and breakfast had given her that opportunity.

“Too bad the sun has to set,” Paul said softly as he steered the boat into the marina.

“Would you like to come over for some wine?” Suzie offered once the boat had been docked.

“Not tonight,” he said with a slight shake of his head. “I have to

meet with someone in the morning, and I want my mind to be clear."

Suzie raised an eyebrow as she wondered who he was meeting. She paused a moment, to see if he would tell her. But Paul was already stepping onto the dock and reaching back to help her across. He tended to keep most things to himself, not in a closed off way, but in the way of someone who was in the habit of being alone.

Paul walked her back to Dune House. When they reached the end of the long drive, he pulled her into his arms.

"One last kiss?" he pleaded as he held her close. Paul was strong, and Suzie loved the way his body seemed to engulf her slighter form.

"Just one?" she pouted with playful disappointment.

He kissed her before she could say another word. Then again. Then once more, until she pushed him away with a laugh.

"All right, remember your meeting in the morning," she winked at him. He watched as she walked towards Dune House and then he turned and walked back off towards the marina.

When Suzie stepped through the front door she heard Mary on the phone. It sounded like she was setting up a guest for a few days later in the week. Suzie hung out by the front desk until Mary hung up the phone.

"New guests?" she asked with a smile.

"Yes, nothing too wild, just a couple that wants a night away," Mary smiled. "Sounds like it might be their first time leaving the baby behind."

"We'll make sure they have some privacy then," Suzie said fondly.

"So, spill," Mary said as she walked around the front desk. "How

was your romantic getaway with Paul?"

"Quite romantic," Suzie admitted with a teasing smile. "He really is an amazing man."

"Well, that makes sense, since you're an amazing woman," Mary pointed out. "But no details?"

"I'm afraid not," Suzie grinned shyly. "What happens on the boat stays on the boat."

Mary offered a dramatic sigh. "Well, I guess I will just have to muddle through my boring life then."

"I don't think you've ever been boring, Mary," Suzie said warmly.

"I do like to keep things lively," Mary winked lightly and then yawned. "I am worn out tonight though. I did some of the vacuuming upstairs. Would you mind finishing down here?"

"Not at all," Suzie said quickly. "And I'll wash off the deck chairs, too. I'm nowhere near ready for bed."

"Ah, to be young and in love," Mary rolled her eyes.

"Young?" Suzie quirked a brow. "You know that we're about the same age, Mary."

"Yes," Mary agreed. "But love makes you young."

Suzie had to smile at that. She recalled the way she had been chasing Paul around the beach. She had felt young then. Not that she ever really felt old, she didn't think she would be old until she hit her nineties, and even then it would be debatable. But she hadn't felt so young until she met Paul.

"Good night, Mary," Suzie said. "I'll vacuum first so that you can get some sleep."

Mary blew a kiss over her shoulder and headed up the stairs to her room. Suzie pulled the vacuum cleaner from the bottom of the stairs and started in the hallway that led to the game room. As she was vacuuming her mind drifted over her day. She already missed Paul. Occasionally she thought about what it would be like to wake up next to him, or at least have the luxury of sharing breakfast with him each morning. But it was a thought that was always chased away by her independent streak. She had plenty of lovers in her time, but none of them were what she would label as commitments. They were fun, they were hot, but they were not meant to be permanent. It felt so very different with Paul, as if maybe, it was meant to be.

Shaking the thought from her mind she finished the vacuuming

and put the vacuum away in the storage closet. Then she headed out to the deck to spray off the deck chairs. She could hear the water rushing against the sand. Everything else was quiet. Garber was a town that rarely ever stayed up late. Even during the weekend most party-goers were silent and home well before midnight. As she sprayed off the deck chairs she smiled at the sight of Dune House towering above her. It had changed a lot on the inside, but as for the outside not much had been done. The old sprawling house was filled with character and she wanted it to remain that way. It was a draw for those seeking a romantic spot that was quite different from the usual run of the mill hotel.

She rolled the hose up and put it away. Then she pushed the deck chairs to the edge of the deck so that they would get the full sun in the morning. The ocean caught her eye as its waves rolled silver in the moonlight. The shade reminded her every time of Paul's eyes, as if the ocean had found its way inside him, and made him part of it.

“All right, Suzie, you're getting out of control with this mushy stuff,” she admonished herself as she walked back towards the front door of Dune House. She still couldn't help stealing a glance towards the marina where several boats, including Paul's were docked. She wondered if he was looking out in the direction of Dune House at the same time.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

The next morning Suzie woke up early. Sometimes she felt like she was in a race with Mary to do her share of the work. Mary was accustomed to taking care of others, and a house. But Dune House was much larger than anything she had ever lived in, and Suzie hated to see her taking on more of the workload. She got up, determined to take care of the runners in the front hall before Mary had the chance to. She rolled up the rug and carried it out onto the front porch. She was beating the dirt and dust from it when she heard someone call out to her.

“Morning, beautiful,” Paul said as he walked down the driveway. Even though it was just past seven, Suzie was sure he had already been up for quite some time. He was an early riser. He was also not alone. There was a young man scuffing along beside him, his hands sunk deep into his pockets. He had a baseball cap pulled down low over his forehead.

“Hi Paul,” Suzie smiled warmly as Paul ascended the steps onto the wraparound porch.

“Hi Suzie,” he replied with an equally warm expression. “I was wondering if you could do me a favor?”

“Of course, what is it?” Suzie asked as she looked from Paul to the man he had walked up with. From what she could see of him, she was sure he was quite young, barely in his twenties, if that. He adjusted the hat on his head which cast more shadow across his face and his eyes flitted nervously around. Suzie felt a little uneasy about him right away.

“This is Trent, he's a new deckhand that I just hired for a fishing trip. He needs a place to stay, so I was wondering if you could rent him a room for the night?” Paul glanced over at Trent. “Trent, this is my girlfriend Suzie.”

Suzie's heart stopped for a moment at his description. She hadn't heard him call her that yet. She decided that she kind of liked it.

“Nice to meet you, Trent,” she said and smiled at the young man. He looked at her with pale blue eyes. They were a beautiful shade, but something about them seemed to be shifty.

“You too, Miss,” he replied calmly. Suzie tilted her head slightly to the side as she studied Trent. He seemed polite enough.

“Well, we have plenty of rooms available,” Suzie said as she realized that Paul was still waiting for an answer. “Let me show you one, Trent,” she invited. As she stepped into Dune House, Trent and Paul filed in behind her.

“Nice place,” Trent commented. It was clear that Trent was a man of few words.

“It's one of the oldest houses in the entire town of Garber,” Paul gushed with pride. “Suzie and her friend Mary have worked very hard restoring it.”

“With plenty of help from you, Paul,” she reminded him with warmth in her voice.

“Great,” Trent nodded.

“I just need to enter your details in the computer,” Suzie said as she walked towards the computer.

“Sure,” he said as she typed in the information that he rattled off.

“Okay, let me show you a room,” Suzie said as she walked towards one of the available rooms.

“You can stay here, Trent, there are extra blankets and pillows in the closet. You're welcome to have breakfast with us in the morning,” Suzie smiled.

“No thanks, I keep to myself,” Trent said. Then he nodded at Paul and stepped into the room. Suzie was a little surprised when he closed the door behind him. Paul grimaced and walked back with her towards the living room.

“He's not the friendliest soul,” he said with a shake of his head. “To be honest I'm taking a chance on him, because he hasn't been a deckhand long. But I need some help on this next run, and he's available, so off we go.”

“Are you sure about him?” Suzie asked hesitantly. “He just seems a little off.”

“Most men who spend their time on a boat are,” Paul laughed. “You've just become used to it with me.”

“You may be right about that,” she grinned. “Well, he's welcome to stay.”

“Thanks,” Paul nodded as Suzie walked over to the front desk.

“So, this is a big job?” she asked with a slight frown.

“Yes, but it's a quick one,” he shrugged. “At least it will be with an extra set of hands. I wanted to try to be free for the weekend,” he added. “In case you let me whisk you away.”

“Paul, that sounds great,” Suzie said. “But I do have some guests coming in over the weekend. You know that tends to be our busiest time.”

“I know, so I can be here to help if you need it, or just to rub your feet,” he suggested.

“Oh a foot rub does sound nice,” Suzie giggled. “But you're the one who will be working hard. Just promise me that you'll be safe.”

“I always am,” he replied.

“Promise?” Suzie insisted as she looked into his eyes.

“Promise,” he replied before offering her a light kiss. “I have to run some errands for the trip.”

“Have fun,” Suzie grinned.

“You already did the runners didn't you?” Mary asked from the top of the stairs with a huff.

“Beat you to it!” Suzie declared. “I just have to pull them in.”

“Not if I get to them first,” Mary said as she hurried down the stairs. The rest of the day was an all-out race to see who would get the cleaning and preparation tasks done first. Suzie never noticed Trent coming or going from his room. She assumed he might be sleeping in preparation for his journey, but she still couldn't shake the way she felt. At dinner when she knocked on his door to see if he wanted to join them, all she received was a gruff 'No'.

Suzie was glad to be able to do a favor for Paul, but something about Trent just left her uneasy.

“Make sure that you lock your door tonight,” she murmured to Mary as they walked down the hall to go to bed.

“I always do,” Mary said. “Why? Is there something you're uncomfortable about?”

“I just don't know if I trust Trent,” Suzie replied hesitantly. “It just seems like there is something off about him.”

“I understand,” Mary nodded. “You have to trust your instincts, Suzie.”

“Thanks, Mary,” she smiled. “At least he will only be around for

a few days."

"Yes and most of that he will be on the boat with Paul," Mary reminded her. "But if you feel uncomfortable about anything, please tell me?" she smiled warmly at her friend.

"Yes, I will," Suzie replied and gave Mary a hug goodnight. As Suzie stepped into her room she glanced around at its contents. She loved decorating so her room had the most flare of all the rooms in Dune House. She changed her style often. The latest motif was black and white with French Quarter influences. It exuded a sense of romance and mystery, which was exactly how she felt about her relationship with Paul at the moment. She knew that he wanted more, but she was dragging her feet.

For so long her life had solely been about her. She had watched Mary engage herself to one man, dedicate her life to one man, and witnessed the hurt that her friend experienced when that man only returned her love with hurt. Of course there had been the rare occasion that Suzie felt some envy of the married life. But it was a fleeting feeling, and was easily swept away by tearful conversations with Mary. She never wanted anything to dampen her freedom, or hold back her creativity.

But that's not how she felt with Paul. If anything she felt freer than she ever had. He inspired her creativity so much that she had painted her feelings for him all over her walls. As she sprawled out across her bed, she thought of him for the thousandth time. She closed her eyes and remembered their latest excursion on the beach, and how lovely it had been to share that special memory with only him.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

The next morning Suzie woke up to the aroma of French toast and coffee. She smiled to herself. They didn't often have guests during the week so Mary was outdoing herself to persuade Trent to have a hot breakfast. Suzie doubted that he would even get up for breakfast as he had mentioned the day before that he didn't want it. She didn't want Mary to be disappointed, plus the food smelled delicious.

Suzie dressed quickly. She caught a glimpse of her brassy blond hair in the mirror and cringed. She had been so busy with Dune House and Paul that she hadn't kept up with dying it. It needed a few touch ups. She ran her fingers across the faint discoloration under her bright blue eyes. Mary insisted that no one else could see it, but Suzie was feeling more and more self-conscious about it. With a sigh she headed out into the hallway and down the stairs to join Mary for breakfast.

As she stepped out into the dining room area, she spotted Trent sitting at the table. But there was also someone else sitting beside him. Paul in his usual dark blue top and faded jeans. He always looked so relaxed in his work clothes. Suzie studied him for a few minutes while he didn't know that she was there. She loved the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled, lightening the brooding gray color. She adored the subtle twitch of his upper lip when he was trying to hold back a laugh. He was telling Trent a story about one of his fishing trips.

“So, I tried to reel this huge sucker in,” he explained. “But it was fighting me tooth and nail. It kept flipping and twirling in the water. By the time I got him out, he was wound up tight like a spool of thread. I was so excited that I had won the battle, I didn't even pay attention to what I was doing. I just cut the fishing line.

Next thing I know it unraveled and that fish plopped right back in the water and swam away."

"Huh," Trent narrowed his eyes. "Shouldn't have cut the line until he was in the bin."

"I know that," Paul said impatiently. "That's the point of the story. The battle isn't won until it's won."

"Right," Trent cleared his throat and stabbed his fork into a portion of his French toast.

"I think it's a lovely story," Suzie said as she stepped up behind Paul.

"Suzie," he smiled warmly and stood up from his chair to greet her. Suzie hesitated just a little. Trent was their guest, and she was officially on duty. But she couldn't resist the soft kiss that Paul offered.

"I hope you don't mind," Paul said quickly. "Mary extended the invite, since we're launching right after breakfast today."

"Oh, I'm sure she doesn't mind," Mary called teasingly from the kitchen.

"I don't mind at all," Suzie replied happily. "Will you two be gone long?" she asked.

"Just two days," Paul replied. "Going to get Trent's feet wet," he grinned.

Trent seemed oblivious to Paul's remarks. Suzie tried to keep a smile on her face. She had no idea how Paul was going to tolerate being stuck on a boat with Trent for two days. She could barely stand him for more than a few minutes. This was quite odd for her, because she usually could handle any personality thrown at her. In her line of work as a reporter she had to be able to communicate with all kinds of people. She didn't always like everyone she met, but she could deal with them. However, Trent was a different story.

"More French toast?" Mary offered as she stepped into the dining room.

"No, coffee," Trent replied without looking up. Suzie noticed Paul's jaw clench. He wasn't always the most amiable person, but he had strict, old fashioned standards about how women should be treated.

"I'd love some, Mary, thank you," Paul said with a smile, though his eyes were still locked on Trent.

"Wonderful," Mary said and slid two more slices of French toast onto his plate.

“I'll get the coffee,” Suzie said with an edge in her voice. “Would you like some as well, Paul?” she asked.

“Yes please, I could use a fresh cup,” Paul replied smoothly. “Thank you very much.”

Suzie followed Mary back into the kitchen.

“How did you not toss that plate of French toast into Trent's lap?” she asked while she walked over to the coffee pot.

“Now, Suzie, we have to make customer service a top priority,” Mary laughed.

“Seriously though, how do you have so much patience?” Suzie demanded. “I need to borrow some!”

“Well, the toddler years, and the teenage years,” Mary laughed. “My kids taught me a lot about how to tolerate some very bad attitudes.”

“You are my attitude guru,” Suzie said and bowed playfully before pouring four cups of coffee. She placed the coffee on a silver tray along with some cream, sugar, and stirrers.

“Patience can be learned in a lot of ways,” Mary reminded her. “I wish I had as much confidence and determination as you do. That's something no one has ever taught me.”

“There's still plenty of time,” Suzie replied warmly as she walked out into the dining area carefully carrying the tray. As she was about to set it down on the table, her foot caught on one of the chair legs. The tray tilted as her balance wavered. She managed to keep the coffee cups on the tray, but the cold container of cream slipped right off the lip of the tray and onto Trent's lap.

“Ah!” Trent screamed as he jumped up from his chair. “What's wrong with you?” he demanded as he glared at her. “You clumsy cow, you could have burned me with that coffee. What kind of place is this?” he demanded.

Before he could say another word, Paul had him pinned against the wall with one hand wrapped loosely around his throat. Trent was clawing at Paul's wrist, but Paul didn't even seem to notice Trent's nails digging deep into his skin.

“Don't you ever speak to her that way,” he growled.

Suzie was so flustered by her mistake that she couldn't even comprehend what was happening between Paul and Trent. In the same moment Suzie’s cousin, Jason, and one of his fellow police officers stepped into the dining room.

“Hey, what's happening here?” Jason demanded sharply as he

glared at the two men. “Paul, let go of him, now.”

Trent was struggling to get free. Mary ran in from the kitchen to see what all of the commotion was about.

“Suzie, what's happened?” she asked swiftly.

“I'm so sorry,” Suzie said quickly. “It's all my fault, I slipped and the tray…”

“No,” Paul barked. He had ignored Jason's command. Both Jason and his partner were getting more demanding as they commanded Paul to let go of Trent. “This boy needs to learn some manners. She made a mistake, Trent, it happens. It doesn't give you the right to speak in such a vile way. Do you have something to say?” he asked as if he was correcting a young child.

“Sorry,” Trent croaked out, his eyes wide.

“Paul, enough!” Jason demanded as he stepped closer to the pair. “Let go of him now or I'll have you in handcuffs.”

Suzie's heart was racing. What had started out as a lovely morning had quickly become something terrible.

“It's okay, Paul, please, let him go,” she murmured, flushed with embarrassment.

Paul reluctantly let go of Trent.

“I'm sorry,” Trent muttered again. “It just surprised me.”

“I understand,” Suzie replied, though she didn't completely. She had seen a look of hatred in Trent's eyes that made her very nervous.

“I don't,” Paul warned. “You better rein in that attitude or you can forget about the job I offered you,” he warned.

“Here, let me clean it up,” Trent offered and took the towel from Mary's hand. He began mopping up the cream that was spilled on the floor. His entire demeanor appeared to have changed. But Suzie could still see the anger in his sharp gestures.

“See, everything is settled,” Paul said brusquely as he looked over at Jason.

“Unless he decides to press charges for assault,” Jason pointed out with clear annoyance. “Paul, I could arrest you for ignoring my instructions.”

Paul locked eyes with Jason. He didn't have to say a word, his expression said it for him.

“Aw Jason, everything seems settled now,” his partner said mildly.

“Are you okay, Suzie?” Jason asked as he turned to her. “Mary?”

he asked.

“I'm fine,” Suzie replied, still a little shaken. Mary nodded and picked up the container of cream.

“I just wanted to stop by and say hello, introduce you to my new partner,” Jason explained calmly, though his eyes kept drifting back towards Paul with a hint of animosity. “This is Kirk Rondella.”

Kirk tipped his hat slightly. He looked about ten years Jason's senior. His hair was shaved close to his scalp. His stance reminded Suzie of some of the military men she had done interviews with.

“Nice to meet you, Kirk,” Suzie said and managed a smile. “Welcome to Dune House. I'm sorry for the chaos,” she frowned. “Just one of those crazy mornings.”

“Seems that way,” Jason said, his voice still edgy.

“Trent is my new deckhand,” Paul explained courteously.

Jason only nodded slightly. It was clear that he was still rankled by Paul's behavior.

“Let me get us all some fresh cream, and Jason, Kirk would you like some coffee?” Suzie offered.

“There's plenty of French toast,” Mary suggested warmly.

Jason glanced over at Kirk, who was grinning from ear to ear.

“We have a few minutes before patrol starts,” Jason agreed. “Thank you.”

Suzie and Mary slipped back into the kitchen while the four men settled around the table.

“What was that about?” Mary demanded as soon as they were alone in the kitchen.

“I spilled the cream in Trent's lap,” Suzie admitted, still mortified. “He said some rude things to me, and Paul jumped into action. It was a little over the top, don't you think?” she asked hesitantly.

“Paul was just coming to your defense,” Mary pointed out. “You were right about Trent's attitude. Maybe some time alone on the boat with Paul will teach him some proper manners.”

“Maybe,” Suzie frowned as she poured two more cups of coffee. “But I hope that it doesn't end up with one of them tossed overboard.”

“At least you know it won't be Paul,” Mary smiled confidently as she prepared a plate filled with slices of French toast.

“I still think it was a little over the top,” Suzie shook her head.

“Suzie,” Mary said as she picked up the plate. “You have to

admit, it must have felt wonderful to have a man come to your defense that way."

"Maybe just a little," Suzie replied as she tried to hide her smile.

"Paul is still nervous," Mary added. "So, he went a little overboard, it didn't seem like Trent minded."

"I know, but I can fight my own battles," Suzie pointed out. She carried the two cups of coffee instead of placing them on a tray. Mary picked up the fresh cream.

"Yes, of course you can," Mary agreed with a soft sigh. "But it is nice when you don't always have to fight them on your own."

Suzie smiled sympathetically. She knew that Mary had often had to battle through things on her own.

"Maybe I'm being a little too sensitive," she agreed. But she still felt very unsettled. Trent's presence had her on edge, but Paul's behavior had made her even more confused. As they walked back into the dining room they were greeted by uproarious laughter from the group of men. It seemed as if the disturbance from a few moments before had been forgotten. Suzie and Mary sat down at the table with the others, and joined into the conversation.

"It isn't easy being a rookie," Jason said, red-faced. "How was I supposed to know that he was a mime?"

"The not talking didn't give you a hint?" Kirk joked lightly.

"It seemed like non-compliance to me," Jason chuckled.

Suzie smiled at her young cousin. She knew he tried hard to be the best police officer he could be.

"Did you restrain him in an invisible box?" she asked, drawing more laughter from the group.

"Let's just say that he had a little difficulty once the handcuffs were on," Jason laughed.

"Well, luckily for me I have a seasoned officer to protect me from those pitfalls," Kirk volunteered with a grin.

"It's always good to have someone experienced to learn from," Paul agreed and cast a short glance in Trent's direction.

"True," Trent offered, though he was busy preparing his coffee. He still seemed detached from the rest of the conversation.

Jason and Kirk polished off their coffee and breakfast quickly.

"Time to be on the lookout for those dangerous mimes," Kirk quipped as he stood up from his chair.

"Ha ha," Jason retorted with a grin.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Kirk," Suzie said. "I'm sure we'll

be seeing plenty more of you."

"I hope so," Kirk said. "That French toast was delicious. Thank you, both."

"Anytime," Mary smiled.

As Jason and Kirk left, Paul locked eyes with Suzie. "Do you have a moment before we set sail?" he asked.

"Of course," Suzie nodded.

"I'll just take these to the kitchen," Mary said as she began clearing the plates. Amazingly Trent stood up and began gathering the coffee cups. Once the two had disappeared into the kitchen, Paul walked over to Suzie's chair.

"I'm sorry if I was a little out of bounds," he said swiftly. "I just couldn't stand him talking to you that way."

"I understand," Suzie smiled. "But you can't do that to all of our unruly patrons."

"I know," he agreed. "Trent just has a way of pushing my buttons. I hope the trip goes smoothly."

Suzie was a little surprised by his comment. She wondered if he felt the same uneasiness about Trent that she did.

"Just be careful, okay?" she asked as she looked into his eyes.

"Always," he replied and kissed her gently. "I'll be back soon," he promised.

After Trent and Paul left, Suzie walked back into the kitchen to wash the dishes.

"Looks like Paul really knocked some sense into Trent," Mary commented as she helped clean up.

"I hope so," Suzie said reluctantly. "I don't think they're a good match to work together."

"Two days trapped on a boat should cure that," Mary laughed lightly.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

With Trent gone there wasn't much to do at Dune House. Suzie occupied herself with catching up on a novel she had been meaning to read. Mary was busy talking with her daughter on the telephone about the new semester of college classes she was lining up. As Suzie tried to concentrate on her book, her mind kept drifting back to Paul, and to Trent. She was a little more worried than usual about Paul being out on the water. By the evening she became a little more relaxed. She found Mary sitting out on the section of porch that overlooked the water. The sun was just beginning to set.

“Did you have a nice chat?” she asked as she sat down beside Mary.

“Oh yes,” Mary said happily. “She's really passionate about school this year.”

“I'm glad,” Suzie smiled. She knew that Mary worried about her children, but both seemed to be off to a fantastic start as adults. “Would you like to take a walk?” Suzie offered.

“Yes, need to work out these knees,” Mary agreed as she stood up. Mary's knees gave her some trouble from time to time, she called it getting older, Suzie called it having too much weight on her shoulders for too many years. As they stepped down into the sand Suzie sighed contentedly. She was really starting to settle into life at Dune House and the quaint beachside town of Garber.

“I wonder how far out they are?” she muttered casually as she looked out over the water.

“Isn't it strange to think there are so many people out on the water while we're walking on the sand?” Mary mused. “Sometimes the ocean seems like an eternity.”

“It sure does,” Suzie agreed with a touch of worry.

“Are you still concerned about Paul and Trent getting along?”

Mary asked.

“A little,” Suzie admitted.

“Men have a different way of getting along,” Mary said softly. “I can't say I understand it.”

“I'm not sure I would care to,” Suzie laughed, but her laughter faded as she heard sirens wailing in the distance.

“What do you think is going on?” Mary asked when she saw a police boat zip across the water. It was from the next town over, with Parish clearly marked on the side of the boat.

“I don't know,” Suzie said with a frown. “But at least it's not happening in Garber.”

They had walked almost a mile along the beach when they finally turned back. The sun was disappearing and the sky was becoming littered with stars.

“I couldn't imagine a better way to spend an evening,” Mary said as she kept pace with Suzie. “Do you ever miss the adventure of your old career?” she asked.

“Probably about as much as you miss the adventure of the teenage years,” Suzie grinned. When they reached Dune House again, Jason was waiting for them on the porch. His partner was not with him.

“Hi Jason,” Suzie said cheerfully, but her jovial attitude faded when she saw his grim expression.

“Is something wrong?” Mary asked.

“I don't know how to tell you this, Suzie, but there's been an incident,” he cleared his throat.

“Is that what the police boat was about?” she asked.

“Yes, it's not my jurisdiction, but I wanted to tell you myself,” he frowned and gestured to one of the benches on the porch. “Maybe you should sit down.”

“It's not Paul is it?” Suzie gasped. “If it is, just tell me, Jason!”

“It's not Paul exactly,” Jason said. “Trent's body was found in Parish, it looks like it was washed ashore.”

“What?” Mary muttered in shock. “His body? Do you mean that he is dead?”

Suzie was so stunned that she couldn't bring herself to speak. She finally forced some words past her lips. “Did the boat sink?” she asked.

“The coast guard has no reports of a boat in trouble,” Jason explained. “All we know right now is that Trent's body was found

on shore. He didn't drown, Suzie," he drew a shaky breath. "He was beat up pretty bad, and I heard that he might have been stabbed."

Suzie sat down on the bench as her legs began to give way. Mary wrapped her arm around her shoulders.

"Try not to worry too much, Suzie. I'm sure that there has to be an explanation. Paul will be here soon to tell us," she added.

"Look Suzie, I know that you and Paul have been dating, and so do the Parish police," he frowned.

"What? How do they know that?" she asked, still very confused.

"Because I told them," Jason admitted. "When they found out I knew Paul, they asked me some questions."

"Oh?" Suzie could barely focus on Jason. "Are they searching for the boat? What if Paul is in the water?"

"Suzie, all of Parish's police force is on this. A few of the locals are looking into it, too, but we really can't investigate it," he hesitated a moment and then looked directly into her eyes. "The tracking system has been disabled on Paul's boat and I think they consider him a suspect at the moment. They may want to question you about his relationship to Trent."

"Why would they think that?" she demanded with frustration. "If Trent is dead, Paul must be hurt or overboard. He wouldn't have let anything happen to Trent."

"That's not how it looked this morning," Jason said uneasily.

"Jason," Suzie stared hard at him. "Did you tell the Parish police about the argument this morning?"

"It was more than an argument," Jason said defensively. "You have to understand, Suzie, I'm an officer of the law, I can't just hide information that could be important in a murder case."

"You are insane if you think that Paul had anything to do with Trent's death," Suzie shot back. Suddenly her legs had strength again. She stood up and glared directly at Jason. "You know he didn't do this."

"I didn't say I suspected him," Jason said as he raised his hands in innocence. "But with Kirk at my side, I had to demonstrate proper protocol, I had to inform the Parish police officer about what I had seen. How could I explain it if I didn't?"

"Unbelievable," Suzie said with fury in her voice.

"Suzie," Mary said gently as she took her friend's arm in her own. "Jason has a point. He was just doing his job. But all three of us know that Paul wouldn't have done this. Like you said, I'm sure

that Paul will be here soon to clear all of this up."

"Let's hope so," Jason frowned. "I know that you're upset with me, Suzie, but I had no other choice."

Suzie frowned and shook her head. She knew that Jason had to tell the truth to the other officer, but it made her sick to her stomach to think that Paul was being treated as a suspect.

"What if they don't find him?" she moaned. "What if he's out there somewhere suffering and no one finds him?"

"I'm sorry, Suzie," Jason murmured.

"It's going to be okay," Mary said firmly. "It has to be okay. We all just need to process this. Jason, is there any way you can get on the investigation?" she asked hopefully.

"I can't," Jason shook his head. "Parish has a much larger police department and they are very territorial. The captain already told me directly to stay out of it. I argued with him which he wasn't very impressed about but I managed to convince him to let me be the one to tell you what had happened as I said that if I told you then I might be able to find out if you knew anything about Paul's location. But he made me promise to stay out of it once I had spoken to you."

Suzie's expression softened at his words. She knew how important being a police officer was to Jason, yet he was willing to argue with his superior so he could be the one to break the news to her straight away.

"Thank you, Jason," she whispered. "I just can't believe this is happening. Can you take me to where Trent was found?"

"It's not a good idea tonight, Suzie," Jason said firmly. "The police are doing a full investigation, you won't be able to get anywhere near there. All we can do tonight is hope that Paul shows up with an explanation."

"I have to do more than that," Suzie said with determination.

"I'm warning you, Suzie, if you get in the middle of their investigation, they will not be happy. Parish PD is not like Garber, they will not hesitate to make you face consequences for interfering. I really should get going I'm in the middle of my shift," he frowned. "Are you going to be okay, Suzie?"

"No," Suzie replied with wide eyes. "No, I won't be okay until Paul is standing here beside me, safe and sound."

"It's okay, Jason, I'll be with her," Mary assured him. "But please call us if you hear anything more."

“Of course,” he nodded and took one long look at Suzie. “I'm sorry, Suzie.”

Suzie could only nod before turning to look out over the vast ocean. “Where are you, Paul?” she whispered.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

“This can't be happening,” Suzie kept repeating as she paced back and forth across the living room. Mary was perched on the edge of the couch as if she was prepared to tackle Suzie if she bolted for the door.

“It's going to be okay,” Mary said for what might have been the hundredth time.

“How?” Suzie asked as she turned to face her friend. “How could this possibly be okay? Not only is Trent dead, but Paul is the main suspect in his death. You and I both know that Paul couldn't have killed him, so where does that leave Paul?” she gasped out.

“I…,” Mary tried to think of something that would comfort Suzie, but no good solution came to her mind. “I'm sorry, Suzie, I'm just not sure,” she finally replied before closing her eyes.

“I think there has to be something I can find out at the crime scene,” Suzie said firmly. “I need to be there, not holed up here waiting for news that may never come.”

“You heard what Jason said, Suzie,” Mary warned her sharply. “If we get in the middle of the investigation it might look even worse when it comes to their suspicion of Paul.”

“Suspicion of Paul,” Suzie blurted out with rage in her voice. “Those incompetent pinheaded cops from Parish couldn't run an investigation if they tripped and fell into the murderer.”

“That's one person's opinion,” a voice carried from the porch of Dune House. Suzie had left the door open in case Jason came back. She wasn't expecting anyone else. But the voice wasn't familiar. Suzie and Mary exchanged a quick nervous look before Suzie went walking towards the porch.

“Be careful, Suzie,” Mary said as Suzie stepped through the open door and out onto the porch. Leaning against the front railing was a

classic, small town police officer, right down to cowboy boots and a toothpick between his clenched teeth. Suzie noticed that like herself he appeared to be in his fifties, but that was where the similarity ended. His eyes were hard and icy as they settled on her.

“Are you Suzie Allen?” he asked.

“What if I am?” Suzie replied calmly and folded her arms across her stomach.

“Well, if you are Suzie Allen,” the officer replied and paused to chew lightly on his toothpick. “Then you're who I need to talk to. My name is Officer Brown, and I work for Parish PD.”

“Have you found Paul?” Suzie asked urgently. “Is he hurt?”

“So, you are Suzie Allen,” he said as he narrowed his eyes once more. “Unfortunately, your boyfriend is still missing.”

Suzie cringed at the term. It sounded so juvenile when the officer said it.

“Are you looking for him?” Suzie gasped out. “He must be lost, or injured.”

“Or he's on the run,” the officer suggested in a hard voice. “He killed a man, and decided the best escape was to flee on his boat.”

“He didn't kill anyone,” Suzie argued with determination.

“Ma'am, are you going to deny that there was a physical confrontation over breakfast this morning?” he asked as he turned to face her. His muscular frame was rather intimidating. The way he flicked his toothpick was just as disturbing.

“There was a disagreement,” she frowned. She knew that Jason had already told the police about it, so there was no point in lying.

“A disagreement that led to Paul's hands around Trent's throat,” the officer clarified stiffly.

“One hand,” Suzie huffed and lowered her eyes. “It was my fault. I spilled cream all over Trent's pants, and Trent mouthed off about it, and well, Paul is very protective of me.”

“Protective enough to kill someone?” he asked. “Maybe you even suggested it?”

Suzie stared at the officer with mounting dislike.

“I don't know what it is about your investigation that is leading you to such terrible conclusions, but I can assure you, Paul would never have anything to do with Trent's death. So, you are free to continue barking up the wrong tree, or you could actually do something to find a good man who is likely hurt or otherwise detained,” she snapped sharply in return.

“Slow down there,” he chuckled. “I'm not looking for a lecture. I'm here to ask you for a few answers, that's all. If you really want me to find your boyfriend, then you will answer me honestly.”

“Fine,” Suzie shook her head and braced herself for the next questions.

“I want to know if there was anything between Paul and Trent. Had they met before Paul hired him?” he asked.

“No, I don't think so. Paul even said that Trent didn't have much experience, and that he was taking a chance on him,” Suzie explained.

“Hmm, so he might have grown frustrated at Trent's lack of skill when it came to being a deckhand,” the officer said and made a note.

“That is not what I said,” Suzie said roughly. “You have a way of twisting things. Aren't you the least bit concerned about the truth in this situation? A man is dead, and his murderer is on the loose, while Paul is missing.”

“Well, I'm very concerned,” the officer replied and glared openly at her. “I'm concerned about finding the man who would kill a boy who was barely out of his teens, over what? Insulting his girlfriend?”

“If that makes sense to you then Parish PD is in a lot of trouble,” Suzie said dismissively. “I don't have to answer any more questions. I want you off my property!”

“I see you have a bit of a temper as well,” he said gravely and shook his head. “If I need any more information from you, I will be in contact. I expect you to cooperate with this investigation. Especially considering that you have law enforcement in your family.”

“If you're referring to my cousin Officer Jason Allen, I think you should consult with him on what it's like to be a real police officer,” Suzie snapped back. “Off my property,” she demanded and pointed in the direction of the driveway. The officer shook his head. From the glint in his eyes Suzie suspected he might be trying to think of a reason to arrest her. Instead he just turned and walked down the steps. Mary inched her way out of the doorway of the house.

“Suzie, I can't believe you talked to him like that,” Mary said with awe in her voice. “Weren't you afraid that he would arrest you?”

“For what?” Suzie shrugged and sighed. “I might make my own

citizen's arrest for impersonating a police officer since he doesn't have the ability to backup that badge."

"Wow, Suzie," Mary frowned. "You're on a bit of a roll. But you need to remember that Parish PD is in charge of this case. If they have more questions that same officer is likely to be the one that comes back."

"Well, I won't be here when he does," Suzie replied and stomped back into the house. "I'm not going to leave Paul out there, alone and hurt, while these idiots waste time trying to build a case against him."

"Suzie, promise me at least that you won't do anything until morning," Mary pleaded. "Then I will go with you to check out whatever you want to look into. If you try to go down there now you'll end up arrested, or worse. I know how upset you are, but you have to try to stay calm and think this through. You don't want to make things worse for Paul than they already are."

"It's okay, Mary," Suzie finally nodded. "You're right. I'm just going to try to get some rest, and so should you."

"Please Suzie, don't do anything rash," Mary warned her. "Or at least wake me up before you do."

"I promise," Suzie nodded solemnly. Once Mary headed off to her bedroom, Suzie walked towards her own room. She couldn't bring herself to close the door. It was like closing the reality of what was happening to Paul out of her mind. She walked over to the large windows that overlooked the water and pulled back the curtains. In the sky thunder rumbled low and long. She cringed at the sound. Would nature be so cruel as to toss a storm into the mix? If Paul was still out there somewhere on the water, in his boat or out, a storm could only complicate things.

"Please," Suzie whispered to the sky. "Keep him safe."

The words were muted by the fear in her voice. Even though she had promised Mary she would try to get some rest that was not a possibility. She pulled out her computer instead. She opened it up. It had been quite some time since she had drawn on her investigative skills, but she was going to need them. She searched Trent Baker. There were of course plenty of Trent Bakers in the world. She clicked on several of the results. But they all led to people that did not meet the description or age of the man she was looking for. She shifted gears and began searching Trent Baker associated with deckhand. There were still a few results, but they

all led to dead ends. It was as if the Trent she had met did not exist.

Suzie knew that with Trent's young age he should have had his face and name splashed all over the internet from social media to blog posts. But there was nothing on the internet that seemed to be directly related to him. Suzie was getting more frustrated by the moment. She slipped quietly out of her room and down the stairs to the front desk. She started the computer and pulled up Trent's information. She printed off the registration she had filled out for him. Then she took it back upstairs with her. She began searching his name associated with his birth date. Still she could not find a result that matched the Trent she knew.

In the technology age it was nearly impossible to keep yourself off the internet, so the deeper Suzie had to look the more suspicious she became. The only time she hadn't been able to find something on someone was when they were using an alias. Not many people set up social media under fake names because there was often no reason to. Maybe Trent Baker, wasn't Trent Baker at all. She glanced at her watch and waited impatiently for morning to come.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

Suzie waited until the sun finally rose above the sea. Then she pulled out her cell phone. She dialed Jason's number. He didn't answer. She dialed it again. On the third call he finally answered.

“Hello?” he mumbled half asleep.

“It's Suzie,” she said quickly, guessing that his eyes were too blurry to even see her name on the caller ID.

“Suzie, what's wrong? Is it Paul?” he asked, his voice coming alive as he remembered what was happening.

“Nothing new,” she said quickly. “But I'm going out to look at where Trent’s body was found this morning. I just wanted you to know.”

“Suzie, I really don’t think you should,” Jason said.

“There’s no harm in going there, I won’t touch anything,” Suzie said. “But I have to do something, I can’t sit here doing nothing.”

“Okay, Suzie, if you do go there, make sure that you're careful. You don't need to paint a target on your back.”

“I'll be careful,” she promised him. “Jason, do you know if Parish PD had any trouble identifying Trent? I did some research on him last night, and I can't find a trace of him.”

“I told you, Suzie, I'm not allowed to be involved. Parish PD is not telling me anything,” he added gruffly, as if it was not for lack of trying. Suzie tried not to show her frustration. She knew it wasn't Jason's fault that he didn't have access to the investigation.

“Okay, I understand,” she muttered.

“If there are still police where they found Trent, you need to stay back, understand?” he sighed before she could answer.

“Yes, of course, Jason,” she replied.

“I should be going with you, Suzie, but if I'm spotted there it could be a big problem between Garber and Parish PD. Are you sure

you're going to be okay?" he asked.

"I'll be fine," Suzie assured him before hanging up the phone. There was only one beach in Parish so she hoped it would just be a matter of walking along the beach until she found the crime scene tape. Suzie grabbed her purse. As she opened her door to the hallway, she found Mary waiting for her outside in the hall.

"I'm going with you," Mary said quickly.

"Are you sure, Mary?" Suzie asked hesitantly.

"No question," Mary replied. "I've got a few bagels for us ready to go."

"Thank you, Mary," Suzie said with relief. She was glad she would have company. She was a little afraid of what she might find at the scene.

"I'll drive," Mary offered.

Suzie was fine with that as she was sure that she would break a few laws if she was driving.

The city of Parish was much larger than Garber. It catered more to the business crowd, but still boasted a small strip of beach. The beach however was not a popular place to visit because of the crowded atmosphere of the town center. It was also not known to be a very friendly place. When Mary parked her car in a public beach access parking lot, Suzie looked for any police cars that might still be hovering. She didn't see any nearby. She knew Parish PD would not be far off, however.

Without hesitation Suzie climbed out of the car. Mary followed after her. As they walked across the beach looking for where the body was found, both women were silent. Suzie knew exactly what was on the line. She also knew that if Paul had any ability to communicate in any way he would have gotten a message to her to let her know that he was okay. Paul was most certainly not okay.

He was also most certainly not a killer, at least in Suzie's mind.

“Looks like this is the place,” Mary said quietly as they approached a section of the sand that was roped off by yellow police tape and wooden stakes.

If not for that barrier there would be no way to tell that any crime had taken place. The sand was so expansive, and so empty. There wasn't the slightest sign of a struggle. There were no footprints as the area was covered by water during high tide. The sand did not tell the story of what might have been Trent's last moments. From what Suzie knew, without evidence of what exactly had happened to Trent, the assumption had been made that he had been stabbed on Paul's boat and tossed out to sea, then he washed up on the shore. But Suzie knew that Paul's body could still be out there. Her entire body trembled at the thought. He might have been murdered right here. Suzie grasped the yellow tape that was blocking her way and began to duck under it.

“Suzie, maybe we shouldn't,” Mary warned as she glanced nervously up and down the empty beach.

Suzie didn't reply. She continued to duck under the tape and stepped carefully into the sealed off patch of sand. She imagined Trent's body laying on the sand. If anything she would have wanted to be there just to see his position, any clues his body would have revealed. Of course, Trent's body had already been taken to the medical examiner's office. Suzie could barely restrain herself as she crouched down beside the sand. She wanted to see the truth in it. She wanted something to tell her that Paul was safe despite what all of her instincts were feeling.

“Suzie, are you okay?” Mary asked with a frown as she stood beside her friend. “Try not to worry too much, we don't know for sure that Paul is even in danger.”

“Mary, either Paul is in danger or he's a murderer, which do you think is more likely?” she asked incredulously as she looked up at her.

“I'm sorry,” Mary mumbled. “I'm a little shocked, too.”

“I know you are,” Suzie said apologetically. “I know that you're only trying to help. I just can't believe that he's missing. There is nothing here, Mary,” she breathed out. “Nothing but sand. Nothing to even give a hint as to where Paul or his boat might be.”

As she spoke those words her cell phone began to chime. She reached into her pocket and pulled it out. Her eyes skimmed over

the caller ID to see that it was Jason.

“Hey Jason,” she said with a sigh. “There's nothing here.”

“I know that,” Jason replied quickly. “But that's not why I'm calling. I just spoke to my police chief and he confided that Paul's boat had been spotted further up the shore in Garber. I knew you would want to know. We had some men on it right away, but the boat is already gone. Suzie, this doesn't make things look better for Paul. There's chatter that he's looking for an easy escape route.”

“Thank you for telling me, Jason,” Suzie breathed a sigh of relief. Knowing that Paul's boat was still floating at least allowed her to believe that he hadn't gone down with it in the storm that had passed through the night before. It didn't provide an explanation as to his behavior, but it gave her slight peace of mind. “Can you tell me where it was spotted?”

“On Sunray Point,” he replied. “About three miles north of Dune House. Don't be surprised if you get another visit from Parish PD. They might be expecting him to try to hide out at Dune House considering your relationship.”

“Let them visit as much as they want,” she replied sharply. “That officer couldn't solve a knock-knock joke.”

“Just stay out of trouble, Suzie,” Jason warned.

“I'll do my best,” Suzie replied and hung up the phone. She looked over at Mary as she started walking back towards the car. “Paul's boat has been spotted about three miles north of Dune House, we need to get there as fast as possible.”

“Did anyone see or talk to Paul?” Mary asked with urgency in her voice as she followed Suzie towards the parking lot.

“No, his boat was gone before they could, but I want to see where it was. Maybe he left something behind, or maybe there will be something to prove that he has been abducted or the boat has been stolen.”

“At least it's almost good news,” Mary sighed as she started the car.

Driving back into Garber was difficult. Suzie knew that she might never be able to share some of the special sights they passed with Paul again. She wanted to urge Mary to drive faster, but she was already going nearly twenty miles over the speed limit. Suzie spotted a Parish PD cruiser in the driveway of Dune House.

“Should we stop?” Mary asked.

“No,” Suzie said firmly. “Keep going. If they want to waste their time thinking I know something about Paul's disappearance let them waste it alone.”

They continued in the direction of Sunray point.

“Here it is, this is where Jason said Paul's boat was spotted,” Suzie said as she pointed to an old motel that was slumping along the beach. It was set for renovation but so far it was still an eyesore to most of the community. “Park over there,” she suggested. The parking lot was empty. There was no sign of a police presence. Suzie and Mary locked the car and walked across the parking lot to the beach.

Again, this was an area of the beach that was mostly abandoned. Because of its location and the ample amount of pristine beach to enjoy, it was often ignored. Suzie found herself wondering who would even be out on this area of the beach to report seeing the boat. Flapping in the wind was more yellow police tape. It looked like the police had taken the sighting seriously enough to process the scene even though the boat was gone. Suzie walked over to the yellow tape and yanked it upward. She no longer cared about being careful.

“You shouldn't be there!” a shrill voice shouted from up near the motel. Suzie froze. Mary spun around looking for the source of the voice. “Yes, you two! You shouldn't be there!” the voice said again.

“Who is that?” Suzie questioned as she turned around to scrutinize the motel. A small figure stepped out from the shadows.

“I know you're not supposed to be there, you're no kind of

police," the person accused.

Suzie narrowed her eyes. She could barely see the person beneath a heavy coat and low, floppy hat. What she could see made it clear that the person might not want to be seen. The coat was stained and threadbare. The person's shoes were barely held together with what looked like some duct tape.

"We're just looking," Suzie said in a clear, calm voice. "We're not causing any trouble."

"Trouble, nothing but trouble," the person muttered. As the figure took a few steps closer, Suzie could tell that it was a woman.

"I'm looking for the missing boat," Suzie explained.

"Suzie, don't tell her what we're doing," Mary warned. "She looks unstable."

"Maybe she saw something," Suzie hissed back. In her time as an investigative reporter she had learned that the invisible people, such as the homeless, children, or those working behind the scenes, usually knew a lot more than expected.

"The boat?" the woman repeated. "That poor fellow," she sighed.

Suzie's heart jumped up into her throat. She was certain now that the woman had seen something.

"What fellow?" she asked as she slipped under the yellow tape and moved closer to the woman.

"Well, it was three men," the woman said and smoothed down her coat which was far too heavy to be wearing in the balmy weather. "But only one was sad. The others were angry."

"There were two men with him?" Suzie pressed. "Do you know why they were angry?"

"There's no drugs here," she barked so loudly that Mary jumped back.

"See," Mary said under her breath. "She doesn't know what she's talking about."

"You hush," the woman glared at Mary before looking back at Suzie. "The poor fellow was so sad. He tried to get away. But they wouldn't let him. They made him get back on the boat."

"You saw all of this?" Suzie asked. "Did you tell the police?"

"Trouble, nothing but trouble," the woman shook her head. "They would make me move. You're not going to tell, are you?" she asked with wide, tired eyes.

"No," Suzie said softly. "I won't tell."

She knew that the woman wouldn't be taken very seriously as a witness, but she also didn't want the woman to lose the only home she had.

“Good, good,” the woman nodded. “Poor fellow,” she cleared her throat.

“Did the men hurt him?” Suzie asked breathlessly.

“Sure,” the woman nodded. “Pow, pow!” she swung her hands wildly through the air, causing both Mary and Suzie to duck. “But no bangs,” the woman sighed with relief. “Guns, but no bangs.”

“What about names?” Mary asked. “Did anyone say anyone's name?”

“Just angry words,” the woman shook her head and lowered her voice. “Foul words.”

Suzie was still recovering from the revelation that there were guns involved. She took comfort in the woman saying that they hadn't been fired, but she also knew that if at any time there was a gun involved in an assault there was a high chance of it being used.

“Did they say where they were going?” Suzie asked hopefully. “The poor fellow, he's my friend, I need to find him.”

“Oh, so sorry,” the woman said sadly, and seemed to have genuine sympathy in her eyes. “He was so sad.”

“But did they say anything about a place they might be headed?” Mary asked quickly. Suzie was still staring warmly into the woman's eyes. She had provided Suzie the one thing she needed the most, the certainty that at one point recently Paul was still alive.

“Out to sea,” the woman shrugged and pointed to the wide expanse of the ocean. “Could be anywhere, hmm?” she shook her head. “Poor fellow.”

Suzie reached into her purse. She pulled out some cash from her wallet. She didn't have much but what the woman had provided was priceless.

“Are you safe?” she asked as she handed the woman the money. “Do you need a place to stay?”

“My palace,” the woman pointed at the motel. “Don't need nothing really,” she eyed the money hesitantly. “It's okay, I don't need that.”

“Take it,” Suzie encouraged her. “Maybe you could get some shoes?”

“Sure,” the woman nodded and took the money. “Thanks,” she

glanced between Suzie and Mary. “Don't worry I won't tell. Just don't tell on me.”

“We won't,” Mary promised her.

“I hope you find that sad fellow,” the woman muttered as she walked back up towards the motel. She disappeared in the shadows surrounding the old building. Suzie wondered for a moment how long she might have lived there, uninterrupted until Paul's boat showed up. Then her mind returned to Paul.

“I knew it, he was abducted,” Suzie said quickly as she walked back towards the police tape. “That means he might still be alive.”

“Suzie, I believe Paul is still alive, but you know this woman might not be very trustworthy. She knew the police were here looking for a boat. She might have just made up a story about seeing three men,” she paused a moment, knowing that Suzie might not want to hear that.

“I thought of that,” Suzie admitted. “But it's the best lead we have right now. The only one really. So, we need to use it. If Paul was here, on the sand, he might have left something behind,” she said softly and began looking down at the sand. “To think that he was here, not long ago, probably hoping for help,” she whispered, her heart breaking. She pulled her fingers through the sand and felt something hard beneath it. She pulled it up out of the sand and stared at it strangely.

“This doesn't belong here,” Suzie murmured.

Mary looked at what she was holding up. It was a seashell with rose stripes and a scalloped edge.

“It's a seashell, of course it belongs here,” Mary said with confusion. “There are probably thousands of shells along this beach.”

“But not this one,” Suzie argued. “This one I found on a secluded beach that Paul and I visited together. I gave him this shell to remember our time there. He must have dropped it, to let me know that he was here.”

“Oh, that's a good sign,” Mary said with excitement.

“I bet Paul left this here for me, as a clue to where he was going next,” Suzie said, her excitement growing. “He might be at this very beach! I need to go out there,” she added with certainty. “Paul left this here for me, I just know it.”

“Suzie, I think you're onto something, but how are we going to get there?” Mary pointed out. “It's not accessible by anything but a

boat, right?”

“That's what Paul said when he took me out there,” Suzie sighed and shook her head. “I don't know any of his friends well enough to ask them. Besides, it's already getting around town that Paul is a suspect, so I'm sure not many will want to be involved.”

“There has to be a way,” Mary frowned. “Maybe we could charter one?”

Suzie looked out over the water. She remembered seeing the police boat zip across the waves. “That's it!” she suddenly said. She whipped out her cell phone and dialed Jason's number. He answered on the first ring.

“Jason, I need you to do something for me,” she said before he could even speak.

“What?” Jason asked warily.

“I need you to take me out to a certain patch of beach. It's not accessible by land. I'm pretty sure that Paul left me a clue, and I want to follow it,” Suzie explained practically all in one breath.

“Suzie, slow down,” he said quickly. “What do you mean you found a clue?”

“It was a seashell in the sand,” Suzie began to explain.

“There are plenty of seashells in the sand,” Jason interrupted her.

“I know that, Jason,” Suzie said with exasperation. “But this is a special shell. We found them on this particular strip of beach. Paul said they were only found on that beach.”

“It might be a special shell, Suzie, but it's still just a shell,” Jason pointed out grimly.

“Jason, are you going to help me or not?” Suzie demanded with frustration. “There is a witness that saw Paul being forced onto the boat by two men.”

“What witness?” he asked quickly. “Have you reported it to Parish PD?” he asked.

“No, and I'm not going to,” Suzie said sternly. “It doesn't matter who the witness is. They'll just twist it into Paul being a criminal. What if they catch up with him? Do you think they're going to ask questions or shoot first?”

“Suzie,” Jason sighed. “I think we need to talk about this in person. I'll meet you at Dune House in an hour. Okay?”

“Yes,” Suzie said with a frown. She was hoping it would be sooner, but she wasn't going to get anywhere without a boat.

“And Suzie, don't do anything until we talk,” Jason warned her. “You're dealing with Parish PD, if they get wind that you are withholding evidence of some kind they could lock you up for obstruction of justice. Just go back to Dune House and stay there until I get there, understand?”

Suzie raised an eyebrow. She wasn't used to Jason being so forceful. But that only made it clear to her that he was worried about what might happen.

“I understand,” she agreed and hung up the phone. She pressed the shell between her fingers and closed her eyes. “What I wouldn't give to be psychic,” she sighed as she opened her eyes again. “Jason wants us to meet him at Dune House.”

“Remember there was a police officer there?” Mary said as they walked back towards the car. “Do you think he will still be there?”

“I don't know,” Suzie frowned. “I hope not.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

When Suzie and Mary pulled into the long, open driveway that led up the hill to Dune House, the Parish PD cruiser was still sitting in front of the porch. Suzie cringed as she knew that this might not end well.

“Remember, Mary, no mention of the woman we talked to on the beach, okay?” she asked with a frown.

“I remember,” Mary nodded nervously. “I just hope it isn't that…”

“Hello ladies,” Officer Brown said as he walked up to the car. They hadn't even climbed out yet. “You two are hard to pin down,” he said as he opened Mary's door for her. Suzie jerked her door open and glared over the top of the car at the police officer.

“I didn't think I needed to be easy to find,” she said.

“Well, I thought you might be a little concerned about your boyfriend,” Officer Brown pointed out, his voice growing colder with every word he spoke. “Unless of course, you already know that he is safe.”

“How would I know that?” Suzie asked as she walked around the front of the car to stand beside Mary.

“Maybe you're hiding him,” Officer Brown suggested as he studied her. “Maybe you think love is more important than a man's life.”

“Paul didn't kill anyone,” Suzie said gruffly. “He is a good man. I am not hiding him.”

“But you wouldn't tell me if you were, would you?” he asked as he held Suzie's bright blue gaze with his own penetrating glare. “So, how do I know you're not lying to me?”

“I guess you don't,” Suzie replied coolly.

“Suzie,” Mary grabbed her hand and gave it a light squeeze.

“Officer Brown we have no idea where Paul is. We've been looking for him, that's why we were not here.”

“But that's our job,” Officer Brown growled. “Your job is to be in contact with me, so that if something comes up we can discuss it.”

“Did something come up?” Suzie asked as she pulled her hand from Mary's and folded her arms across her stomach. She was not going to be intimidated by a man who she believed did not care either way if Paul was alive.

“Paul's boat was spotted by the coast guard this morning down near Sunray Point,” Officer Brown explained. “By the time we arrived however, his boat was gone. That should be impossible, considering the coast guard knows every inch of the coast.”

Suzie had to press her lips together to keep from laughing. She knew that Paul was familiar with plenty of places that the coast guard would be hard pressed to find.

“What a mystery,” she managed to say. “Now, you can see that he is obviously not trying to run away like a guilty person would. He is in danger, and needs help.”

“I don't see that at all,” Officer Brown argued. “What I see is a desperate man, who came back to the town he was familiar with, not far from your fine establishment here. Maybe he was expecting you to hide him away inside the bed and breakfast?” he suggested.

“Paul would never do anything to put Suzie in danger,” Mary snapped. It was clear that she was getting frustrated with the police officer's attitude as well.

“Then you shouldn't mind if I take a look around inside?” the officer inquired.

“Do you have a warrant?” Suzie asked and raised an eyebrow.

Officer Brown's expression grew even angrier. “I didn't expect I would need one,” he shot back.

“Well, I'm sorry, Sir, but the privacy of our guests is very important to us,” Suzie said, ignoring the fact that they didn't actually have any guests at the B&B at the moment. “Unless you have a warrant that says you have the right to conduct a search then I'm afraid I am going to have to refuse you.”

“I can't say that reassures me of your innocence, Ms. Allen,” he said and shook his head. “I hope you two haven't gotten yourself into something that you can't handle.”

Suzie stared hard at him and did not say another word.

“Is there anything else, officer?” Mary asked as she looped her

arm through Suzie's.

“Not just yet,” he replied. “But I'm sure we'll be speaking again.”

“I'm sure,” Suzie replied. “When Paul is home safe and sound and you look like a fool for hunting him like a criminal!”

“Suzie,” Mary groaned.

“I hope for your sake, that's the case,” Officer Brown said in a sharp tone. Then he stalked off to his car.

“Suzie, you shouldn't have talked to him like that,” Mary shook her head as the cruiser took off down the driveway.

“Oh, I know,” she said with a huff. “But I have to stand up for Paul, don’t I?”

“I suppose so,” Mary said with a worried frown. “I just hope we find Paul soon, before we all end up behind bars.”

“Don't worry, Mary,” Suzie said as she looked at her friend with a warm smile. “I’ve been there before, we can handle it.”

“Nope, not me,” Mary said firmly as they walked up the steps to the porch. “I'll make us some lunch, and something for Jason,” she said as she disappeared into the house. Suzie rested her hands on the railing and looked out over the water. She couldn't imagine eating anything without knowing if Paul was having a chance to eat. She was still staring out over the water when Jason pulled up. He parked his cruiser and stepped out of the car. Suzie was relieved to see that he didn't have his new partner with him.

“All right, Suzie, maybe you can tell me what is going on now?” he asked. He seemed a little ruffled.

“Is something wrong, Jason?” Suzie asked as he joined her on the porch.

“I just had to lie to my boss to persuade him to let me use the boat,” he said grimly. “It's not something I like to do.”

“You got the boat?” Suzie asked happily.

“You said you needed it, didn't you?” he asked as he met her eyes. “But we can't use it until later this afternoon.”

“What?” Suzie asked. She was getting more frustrated by the moment. “But Paul could be anywhere by then!”

“Suzie, what did you expect me to do, steal it?” Jason frowned. “It's in use for marine patrol until this afternoon.”

Suzie sighed and nodded. “I know, I'm sorry, Jason. I just can't believe that someone took him. What could they want from him?”

“I don't know,” Jason shook his head. “But I can tell you this,” he paused a moment and lowered his voice. “I couldn't leave it

alone, so I ran Trent's name through the system. Turns out it is a false identity. I also had a friend of mine in another department run Trent's driver's license photograph through a facial recognition program and we got no matches."

Suzie's eyes widened at his words. She hadn't expected him to do so much, especially after the spat Jason and Paul had over breakfast. "Did he find anything?" she asked.

"Not much," Jason replied. "Not even a name. But there is absolutely no record of him ever working as a deckhand before. I have a feeling he didn't get on the boat to earn some money from Paul. He must have had other intentions."

"Other intentions," Suzie repeated softly. Her mind was spinning as she processed the new information.

"Jason, good to see you," Mary said as she stepped out onto the porch. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving," Jason replied with a sigh of relief.

"Come inside and eat something," she suggested. "You look like you've lost even more weight," she chastised. Jason was slender to begin with.

"I've been running," he admitted.

"Must be that new girlfriend," Mary said with a slight smile.

"Ah well," Jason blushed almost as red as his hair.

"How is Dr. Rose?" Mary asked.

"Dr. Rose," Suzie repeated interrupting their conversation. "Is she working the case?"

"Most likely," Jason replied, relieved to have the topic changed. "Parish uses her on most criminal cases because she has the most experience in forensics."

"I want to go see Trent's body," Suzie said sternly.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?" Mary asked hesitantly.

"If Paul left the shell for me to find, then maybe there is another clue on Trent's body," Suzie pointed out. "We already know that Trent isn't who he claimed to be. We know he wasn't on that boat to work for Paul. So, we need to figure out what he was doing there, and who he was. If we find that out, we might be able to predict where Paul has been taken."

"I don't know," Jason frowned.

"If we can't get out on the water until this afternoon, I have to do something." Suzie said as she locked eyes with him.

"Suzie, I can't really get involved," Jason began to say.

“No, you can't get involved,” Suzie agreed. “But I can, and I'm going to, with or without your help, Jason.”

“All right,” he nodded and pulled out his cell phone. “I'll give her a call and find out. But I can't promise you that she'll let you in.”

“I'm sure you can work something out,” Mary said with a slightly hidden smile. Jason flicked his eyes in her direction as if he'd been caught in some kind of criminal act. Before he could question what she meant, he turned away.

“Hey it's Jason. I know you're busy. Are you working the Trent Baker case?” he asked. He nodded a little as she replied. “Right well, I'm not working the case, it's not in our jurisdiction, but it involves Paul. Suzie wanted to know if she could come take a look at the remains.”

He paused and reached up to scratch at the back of his neck. “I know it's against procedure,” he agreed and glanced over at Suzie. “Great, okay I'll tell her,” he continued, his tone of voice giving no hint of her response. He cleared his throat and turned away from the two women again.

“Love you, too,” he murmured before hanging up the phone.

“What did she say?” Suzie asked. Mary's eyes were wide as she had overheard what Jason said.

“She said you can come take a look, but you have to be in and out, and you can't touch the body,” Jason said sternly.

“And that she loves you,” Mary added with a sweet smile.

“None of that,” Jason warned as he wagged a finger at Mary.

“How long have you been dating?” Suzie asked with surprise. “Isn't it a little soon to be saying things like that?”

Jason blushed again. “I guess not, if it's what you feel,” he mumbled. “I'll be back later to take you out on the boat,” he added and hurried down the steps.

“But Jason, your lunch!” Mary called out.

“I have to go,” Jason hollered back before taking off in his cruiser.

“He just didn't want us to grill him,” Mary huffed.

“Don't you find it a little bit odd that they are already saying those things?” Suzie asked.

“Not really,” Mary shrugged. “Kent told me on our second date,” she rolled her eyes. ”Not that he meant it.”

Suzie frowned. She had no question in her mind that she loved

Paul, but she had never dared to say it. Now, she might never have the chance.

“I'm going to see Trent's body,” Suzie said and started down the steps.

“But lunch?” Mary called out. Suzie was already at the car.

“Save me something?” Suzie asked with an apologetic frown.

“Sure,” Mary nodded and sighed as she stepped back into Dune House.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

Suzie had visited a Medical Examiner's Office a few times before but it wasn't a place that she preferred to frequent. She was always surprised by how stark it was. Everything was very clean. Everything smelled like chemicals and disinfectant. Even the receptionist who greeted Suzie with a scowl.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“I'm here to see Dr. Rose,” Suzie replied.

“Sorry, you can't see her like that,” the woman said with a sneer.

Suzie looked down at her jeans and button up shirt. She didn't see anything wrong with it.

“Excuse me?” she asked. “Why not?”

“You're breathing,” the receptionist replied. She stared sternly at Suzie. Suzie was confused until the woman erupted into loud laughter that echoed through the otherwise quiet room.

“It's a joke, you know,” she laughed louder. “Only the dead get in,” she continued to giggle.

Suzie could only stare at her, her mouth half-open. Had she been in a better mood she might have laughed. As it was she had no idea how to respond.

The door beside the desk opened and Dr. Rose stepped out.

“Are you telling jokes again, Sharon?” she asked as the receptionist finally muffled her laughter.

“I don't think she got it,” Sharon said glumly.

“I'm sorry, Suzie, things get a little tense around here, so Sharon likes to lighten them up,” Dr. Rose offered a small smile.

“It was a good joke,” Suzie said and offered a quiet laugh to appease Sharon who had returned to her sullen expression. She wasn't someone that Suzie would expect to try and brighten things up, but obviously there was more to Sharon than she realized.

“I'll take you back,” Dr. Rose said and held the door open for Suzie. As Suzie walked through it she felt the temperature drop considerably. It was a little unsettling to walk into a place where she knew dead bodies were waiting to be examined.

“Trent's over here,” Dr. Rose said. “Are you sure that you're up for this?” she asked.

“I'm sure,” Suzie replied, though she wasn't sure at all. Nervously she followed after Dr. Rose.

The body was sprawled out across a gurney with a sheet covering everything but his head and neck. Suzie shivered a little as she looked at it. It was never easy to face mortality. She hadn't liked Trent but that didn't mean she wished him dead. But Paul was in trouble. She had to figure out where he was, and if it meant facing Trent's remains, then she would have to be brave enough to do so.

“Suzie, I'm not sure what you're hoping to find,” Dr. Rose said as she brushed her dark blond hair back over her shoulders. “I've already done the initial exam.”

“Is there anything you can tell me?” Suzie asked. “Is there any sign that can clear Paul?”

“Actually,” Dr. Rose frowned. “I'm sorry, Suzie, but the killer was right handed, as is Paul. From the evidence left on the body it's clear that Paul had close contact with Trent. I even found a few hairs that match Paul's color and texture on Trent's shoulder.”

“You know he didn't do this, don't you?” Suzie asked incredulously.

“It isn't my job to know who did what,” Dr. Rose said firmly. “It's my job to report my findings. Based on the angle of the blows it is possible that the murderer was a similar height to Paul as well. Trust me, I'm not pinpointing Paul, but I am reporting my findings.”

“If it was Paul, then it must have been in self-defense,” Suzie said anxiously. “He must have been under attack.”

“There isn't any evidence to indicate that Trent was the attacker, but there isn't any evidence to dispute it either,” Dr. Rose frowned. “I will know more once the tox screens come back, and I'm able to process some DNA I found underneath Trent's fingernails.”

Suzie's stomach flipped. She wondered what would happen if that DNA came back to match Paul's. Trent had clawed at Paul's hand when he was holding him up against the wall. There was little doubt in her mind that Paul's DNA would be there. But she also knew that Paul hadn't done this. She didn't think he could, even if

he was threatened.

“What about his clothes?” Suzie asked quickly. “Did you find anything in his pockets, or anything like that?”

“There was something,” Dr. Rose said with a slight frown. She picked up one of the evidence bags on the metal table next to her. “It wasn't in his pocket, but it was around his neck. Are you familiar with this symbol?” she asked as she met Suzie's eyes.

Suzie studied the gold necklace inside the plastic bag. The pendant that hung from it looked similar to a medal that would represent a saint. However, instead of there being any kind of religious symbol there was a swirl in the shape of an uppercase A.

“No,” Suzie said as she narrowed her eyes. “Should I be?”

“Not necessarily,” Dr. Rose said as she set the bag down. “The A represents a gang in Los Angeles. It's not a very well-known one, but I have heard of some very ruthless murders that these gang members are involved in. I'm only telling you this, because I want you to understand that Paul likely had no idea who he was getting onto that boat with. Like I said, I have to report the evidence, but if Trent was involved with this gang, then he was likely a very dangerous man.”

Suzie felt sick to her stomach, not just because of the chemical smell. If Trent was such a dangerous man, what did that say about the men who had killed him and were now holding Paul hostage?

“Thank you, Dr. Rose,” Suzie said with a frown. She left the medical examiner's office without much more certainty than she had entered with. But at least she had a lead on who Trent might actually be.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

When Suzie returned to Dune House she noticed the door to Mary's room was closed, which meant she was likely taking a nap. Mary hadn't slept much the night before either. As tired as Suzie was she couldn't wait to get in front of her computer. She wanted to find out about the gang that Trent was associated with. After a little bit of searching she came across some information about them. Dr. Rose had been correct, they had a reputation for being especially violent and ruthless. But that wasn't the only information Suzie found. She also discovered that their main criminal activity was dealing in drugs.

Suzie suddenly recalled what the woman on the beach had said. She had dismissed it as just a little ranting and raving from an unclear mind, but now she realized that the woman had been trying to answer her question. The men who had Paul must have been looking for drugs. It all began to snap together and make sense to Suzie.

“Suzie?” a voice called out from the hallway. “Jason's here,” Mary said.

Suzie closed her computer and nearly ran out into the hall. Mary still looked a little sleepy as she followed after Suzie. They met Jason in the front hall.

“Jason, I think I've figured out just what Trent was doing on that boat, and why those men are holding Paul hostage,” she said breathlessly before Jason could even greet her.

“Wow, that's a lot of police work,” Jason said and blinked. “Could you start from the beginning for me?”

“Trent is associated with a gang that's known for dealing drugs. He didn't have any history of being a deckhand, but he wanted to get on Paul's boat badly. Why would he want to get on the boat? To

transport drugs of course!" Suzie said with a snap of her fingers. "So, he gets on the boat with Paul, who has no idea what he's in for. But then something goes wrong. The deal goes bad, or Paul finds out what Trent is up to, who knows. But something happened that caused those men to kill Trent."

"Okay," Jason said slowly as he followed her thought process. "So, if Trent hid the drugs, then they are likely looking for the drugs. With Trent dead their only hope is if Paul can lead them to the drugs."

"Yes," Suzie said quickly. "Does it make sense now?" she asked with wide eyes.

"It does," Jason admitted.

"But there's one problem," Mary said in a whisper.

"What?" Jason asked.

"Paul wouldn't know where the drugs are, because he would never be involved in such a thing," she frowned.

"You're right," Suzie said, her spirits falling. "Paul's clever enough to lead those men on for a while, but eventually they're going to figure out that he doesn't know where the drugs are."

"Then we need to find him before they do," Mary said with determination. "Is the boat ready?"

Jason nodded. "We only have it for a short time though."

"That's fine, I know exactly where we are going," Suzie said.

The three piled into Jason's police cruiser. He drove them to the marina where the boat was prepped and ready to launch. Jason helped Suzie and Mary onto the boat and then took the helm.

"Are you sure you know how to do this, Jason?" Mary asked nervously.

"Don't worry, Mary, I've taken it out several times," Jason assured her. "It's part of our training."

"Okay," Mary replied and tried to make her smile look a little more confident.

Suzie was staring out across the water. She was willing herself to see Paul, despite the distance separating them. The boat rocked as Jason headed out to sea.

"Can you go faster?" she asked him.

Jason shook his head. "I'm going as fast as I can," he replied. Suzie instructed him where to maneuver the boat.

"I didn't even know this inlet existed," Jason said with amazement as he followed her directions.

“And we need to keep it that way,” Suzie said firmly. “It's one of Paul's sacred places.”

“My lips are sealed,” Jason said.

“Here,” Suzie said and pointed to the shore. “I'll have to wade in.”

“No need,” Jason said as he pulled the boat right up to shore. “It's equipped to dry dock,” he explained.

Jason, Suzie, and Mary made their way off the boat. The beach was as barren as Suzie recalled it being. In the distance she heard Bonnie Blue's mournful cry. Her heart ached as she wondered if Paul would have the chance to hear it again.

“I'll stay with the boat,” Jason said. “If you find anything call me,” he paused a moment. “If you see anyone, I mean anyone, Suzie, call me right away. Don't approach anyone. If Paul is really being held by these criminals then they are ruthless enough to hurt anyone they see.”

“I'll be careful,” Suzie assured him.

“We'll be careful,” Mary corrected gently and fell into step beside Suzie. Suzie made her way along the sand. She was getting more disappointed by the moment. There was no evidence of any struggle on the beach. There was no sign that anyone had even been there since the last time they had visited. She took a deep breath and traced her fingertips along her forehead.

“Think, Suzie,” she said to herself. “Why would Paul lead you here?”

Suzie presumed that the only reason Paul would have left her the clue of the seashell was to guide her to his next destination. But the question remained, had he made it? Was the seashell even a clue in the first place?

“This way,” she said softly to Mary as they made their way out to the private patch of beach that Paul had shared with her.

“It's so beautiful,” Mary said as she drank in the tiny paradise. Bonnie Blue was perched in her usual spot. She turned her head towards Suzie as Suzie approached. Then she wailed and took flight.

“I know, Bonnie,” Suzie said softly to herself. “I miss him, too.”

Suzie began searching the site for anything that Paul might have left as a clue. Or even just proof that he had been there at all. Mary searched right along with her but as the afternoon sun beat down on them, she shook her head.

“Suzie, I don't think there's anything here,” she said softly.

“There has to be,” Suzie said firmly. Her phone began to ring. She knew it was Jason calling them back to the boat. She ignored it. “I can't leave here without something,” she gasped out.

“Even if he was here, Suzie, there's no guarantee that he left something,” Mary explained in a rational tone. “I think it's time we told Officer Brown what we think. Let the police search this area…”

“No,” Suzie said firmly. “They won't look for Paul to help him, they just want to arrest him. I can't let that happen. I have to catch those criminals that took him.”

“Suzie,” Mary said in a softer voice. “There's nothing here but sand. Besides we have guests coming in tonight and…” she gasped as she nearly lost her balance. Her foot had caught on the edge of something sticking up out of the sand. Suzie lunged forward to grab Mary by the arm before she could fall forward into the sand.

“Mary, are you okay?” she asked urgently.

“I think so,” Mary muttered as she straightened herself up. “I wasn't expecting to fall, that's for sure.”

“Did you trip on something?” Suzie asked with a frown.

“Yes, must have been a big shell or something,” she looked down around her feet.

“That's no shell,” Suzie said as she spotted what was sticking up out of the sand. It was a pocket-sized leather book. She plucked the book out of the sand. “I know this book,” she said in a whisper. “This is Paul's log book. He keeps track of his every movement in here when he's out to sea.”

“How do you think it got here?” Mary asked with fascination.

“He had to have left it,” Suzie said quickly. “Look, it's not wet or anything. It couldn't have washed ashore. The way it was buried in the sand means that he was trying to hide it.”

“How would he be able to hide it?” Mary asked with confusion.

“Paul is a brave and brilliant man,” Suzie said with determination. “He is trying his hardest to make sure that someone finds him. I am willing to bet that his last entry in this log book is where he and his captors went next. We have to go there, now,” she said sternly.

“But Jason said we have to go back with the boat,” Mary began to say.

“Paul is very clever, he's a survivor, he would do whatever he had to do to leave a trail so that someone could find him,” she held

the log book tightly in her hand. “I am going to find him.”

Mary was staring up and down the long beach. “But where did he go?” she asked softly.

“I can find it,” Suzie said with confidence. “Paul had me download an application for my phone that will accept coordinates and give directions.”

Her phone began to ring again. Suzie finally answered it.

“Suzie, we're already late, you're going to get me fired,” Jason said with frustration when she answered.

“Jason, Mary's on her way. I'm going to stay out here for a while,” she locked eyes with Mary. “I just need some time to calm down and relax.”

“I think that's a good idea, Suzie,” Jason said. “I'm sorry that you didn't find what you were looking for.”

“I'm sorry, too,” Suzie replied. “Can I call you to get a ride back when I'm ready?”

“I can take the boat back out around sunset,” he replied. “That's the next patrol. Make sure you're ready then, okay?”

“I will,” Suzie agreed.

“I'm sorry, Suzie,” Jason said with a sigh. “I'm sure Paul will turn up soon.”

Suzie couldn't answer. Her throat had gone dry with worry. Was she going to be too late to save Paul?

“Suzie, I don't want to leave without you,” Mary said. She was looking nervously out at the water. “You aren't going after those terrible men are you?”

“I'm just going to see if I can find the location. If I check it out and there's reason to believe that Paul left it as a clue I'll call Jason and let him know,” she promised. “I don't want to waste police time on what could be a wild goose chase.”

“Still, I'd feel better if I stayed,” Mary argued.

“Remember the guests?” Suzie said. “It's their first time away from the baby. They need this to be perfect. Only you can make it perfect.”

Mary sighed. “Fine but don't stay out here long. If anything even feels funny, call Jason. Promise me?”

“I promise,” Suzie said firmly. Mary reached out and hugged her. Then she reluctantly walked back towards Jason and the boat. Suzie tapped the coordinates into her phone. She waited for the program to generate the location. As she had hoped it was along the

same inlet. She would be able to walk to it. She began walking in the right direction. With every step she felt her excitement growing. She was sure that she was going to find Paul at any second. Her heart was racing.

The directions led her through a wooded area. As she emerged on the other side, she caught sight of something glimmering in the water. As she crept out a little farther she could see that it was Paul's boat. Her heart soared as she stared at the boat. Paul was there. He had to be. A little further down the beach she spotted a small shack. It was completely exposed. Suzie guessed that Paul was either on the boat or in that shack. But she also had to anticipate that he wasn't alone. If he was, he would have called for help already. She had to fight the urge to go running towards the boat. She knew it wouldn't help Paul if she were to be captured as well.

Suzie took a breath and formed a plan. She would try to get to the boat first. With any luck Paul would be on it, and the criminals that had held him hostage would be long gone. Maybe he was tied up and not able to use his radio. Maybe, though she hoped it wasn't the case, he was injured and unable to move. She didn't allow herself to think of any other possibility.

“I'm here, Paul,” she whispered, though she knew that he couldn't hear her. To get to the boat she would be slightly exposed. Suzie guessed it would be her best bet to get to the water and then wade towards the boat. If the criminals spotted her she could at least dive under the water. As she walked down towards the edge of the water, her body was tense with fear. She recalled the information she had read about the gang that Trent was affiliated with. If they spotted her they wouldn't hesitate to shoot.

“No bangs,” she remembered the woman saying when she had described what she had seen during Paul's struggle with his captors. But that was only because they wanted Paul alive. They wouldn't care about having another body to add to their tally. In the distance she thought she heard Bonnie Blue's call.

“He'll be back soon,” she whispered more to encourage herself than to appease the bird. Suzie took off her shoes and held them in her hand as she walked into the water. She walked far enough in that she could walk directly to the boat. The water almost came up to her knees but she was too scared to feel the cold of it. Her pants were soaked through as she waded through the water as quickly as possible while keeping an eager eye out for any sign of Paul or the

criminals.

When she finally reached the boat, she could hear the slosh of the waves against the side of the boat. She listened closely, but she didn't hear any sounds coming from inside the boat. In her mind she willed Paul to be okay, and to know that he was going to be rescued. Cautiously she crept closer to the boat. She held her breath as the water sloshed and swirled around her feet. At least the sound of the waves served to drown out what she thought had to be the loudest her heart had ever pounded.

A few more steps took her to the side of the boat. The sun was low in the sky, so the boat cast a shadow that hid her slightly from view. She crouched down beside the boat. When she did, the boat rocked, and made a long, low creaking sound. She tensed as she wondered if it would alert the criminals. She still wasn't sure where they were. She still didn't hear any sounds coming from the boat. As she tried to work up the courage to look inside the boat, she was startled by a voice.

“Be on the look out, it has to be out there somewhere,” the distorted voice said.

After a terrifying moment Suzie realized that the voice was carrying over the radio in Paul's boat. It was likely chatter from the coast guard or other boaters that were looking for Paul's boat. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves and waited to see if anyone would speak on the boat. When no one did she relaxed slightly. Suzie could see the dilapidated shack from where she was crouched down beside Paul's boat. She thought about climbing on to it, to use his radio to call for the coast guard. But she was afraid that there might still be someone hiding inside it.

Suzie also knew that the police would not be looking out for Paul's best interest as he was still considered the prime suspect in Trent's murder. If she was spotted climbing onto the boat by Paul's captors it would mean she wouldn't survive, and more than likely neither would Paul. At the moment she had the element of surprise on her side. She pulled out her cell phone and attempted to send Jason a text. She told him that she had found Paul's boat and that she thought he was being held hostage. She included the coordinates and the best description of her location that she could muster. But when she hit send, the text was delayed because of lack of service.

“Shoot,” she muttered to herself as she tucked her phone back

into her pocket. She was shocked into silence when she heard some shouting from inside the shack. She was too far away to understand what was being said, but the tone of voice was threatening. Between herself and the shack was a long open strip of sand. The moment she stepped out onto it she would be fully exposed.

Suzie drew a deep breath in and looked at her surroundings. The tree line was not far off, but she would have to pass the shack to get to it. Her only chance was to run as fast as she could. Beside the boat she was a sitting duck. If the criminals decided to walk out to the boat, she would be seen right away. After some careful thought the best choice seemed to be to run. She waited until she heard the shouting again. Whoever was holding Paul captive would be less likely to see her coming if they were busy screaming. Once the shouting started, Suzie bolted as fast as she could across the sand. Her heart pounded as she wondered if she would make it.

Suddenly, she heard a loud, sharp noise, the sound of a bullet being fired. She braced herself, thinking that she was about to experience being shot.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

After a few seconds of no pain, Suzie realized the bullet had not been fired at her. She was at the edge of the shack. Now that she was close enough, she could hear what was happening inside. Paul's captor was shouting again.

“That was a warning,” a disgruntled voice said. “The next one will be aimed at you if you don't tell me where the drugs are.”

“I thought they were here,” Paul insisted. “Maybe Trent moved them. This is where they were supposed to be.”

Suzie was a little shocked by his words, but overjoyed to hear his voice. After a moment of elation, she had a terrible thought. What if Paul really had known about the drugs? What if he was trying to make some extra money and didn't think it would be too much of a risk? It was a terrible thing to think. She pushed the thought from her mind.

“You've fooled us one too many times,” the man shouted. “First you said the drugs were by the motel, then you told us that they were somewhere else, and now finally we're here where you swore the drugs were hidden, and you're lying to us again.”

“I'm not lying,” Paul said mournfully. “They should have been here. Maybe they are hidden in those woods.”

“No more maybes! I told you that we shouldn't have killed Trent until we had the drugs,” another voice said with irritation.

“This guy is supposed to be his partner, he must know where the drugs are,” the first voice growled.

“Obviously he doesn't,” the second voice snapped back. “Trent was playing all of us, what makes you think he wasn't playing this guy, too?”

“Well, if he was, he's of no use to us, now,” the first voice said with a grunt. “He's nothing but a liability. He doesn't know where

the drugs are. If we don't find them, it's our lives on the line."

Suzie tensed when she heard those words. She knew that if Paul wasn't worth anything to them, he would never get out of there alive. There were only moments to intervene.

"All right," she heard Paul finally say. "I give in, I know where the drugs are," he admitted.

"See," the first voice said. "All it takes is a little persuasion. So, where are they?" he demanded.

"I can't tell you, I have to show you," Paul explained.

"Another story that he's making up to save his skin?" the second voice said. "I don't trust it, he could be setting us up."

"For what? A swim with the sharks?" the first voice asked. "This place is isolated, no one else is on this beach. He's got nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. If he lies to us, he dies. Do you hear that?" he shouted. "If you play a game with me you will regret it!"

Suzie crept closer to the window of the shack. She was so close that it seemed as if the men were shouting right beside her ear. She peered inside to see Paul tied to an old wooden chair. His hands were bound behind his back, and his feet were duct taped to the legs of the chair. There was no way that he could escape.

"I think he's lying right now," the second voice growled. "If he knew where the drugs were he would have told us already."

"I don't care what you think, I'm not going back to the boss with nothing to show," the first voice snapped. Both of the men were burly, and they wore torn t-shirts paired with ratty shorts. It seemed that they were familiar with the criminal life as they commanded Paul with ease and authority. Suzie ducked back down as the taller man turned towards the window. Her heart raced as she wondered if he had spotted her.

"Gabriel, we need to get out of here," the second man demanded sharply. "What if the coast guard spots his boat? We could be swarmed with cops any minute and you want to waste time on another one of his lies? We're better off just looking for the drugs ourselves."

"So, what if the cops do come?" Gabriel replied harshly. "Then they'll just find the guy that killed his deckhand. The only question is will he be alive or dead to tell the tale. We're not looking for anything but the drugs, pal. If you give them up, you might get out of this still breathing."

"Like I said, I can't tell you, I have to show you," Paul repeated

with determination. “Look I'm doing you both a favor, all of these inlets can be pretty tricky. If you try to find it by yourself you're never going to make it. Let's just get back on the boat and I'll take you where we need to go. You'll see, when we get there, that it was all worth it.”

“I don't know,” Gabriel said hesitantly. “You've been jerking us around for quite some time.”

“Are you really going to believe this idiot?” his partner asked. “He's going to lead us right into a trap!”

“I just want to live,” Paul said calmly. “I'm not ready to call it quits. You just want your drugs, I just want my life. We can do an even exchange, no need for police, or anyone else to get involved,” he said firmly. The way he spoke those words made Suzie wonder if he knew she was outside. Had he seen her when she peered in the window? She didn't dare to look again, or she might be spotted by the two men.

“It's risky,” Gabriel's partner argued. “If we're on the water the coast guard might see us.”

“This whole thing is risky, Joey, that's the point,” Gabriel snapped. “If we don't get the drugs, what do you think the boss is going to do to us? A whole lot worse than the cops ever will.”

“All right, all right,” Joey finally relented. “But I'm staying right next to him the whole time. If he tries anything shady, I'm putting a bullet in his head.”

“Fine,” Gabriel agreed. “If I don't do it first.”

Suzie's stomach twisted with revulsion. They were talking about Paul's life as if it was just another piece of garbage to be tossed aside. There wasn't a trace of remorse in their words.

Suzie heard a blade rip through the duct tape on the legs of the chair. She heard Paul grunt, and wince. Had the blade come too close to his skin?

“Get up,” Gabriel barked so loudly that Suzie jumped.

Suzie heard some scuffing of shoes. She knew that Paul was standing up.

“You stay in front of me,” Joey demanded. “You feel that?” he asked. “That's a gun in your back. If you try anything funny I will pull the trigger, got it?”

“Got it,” Paul's hardened voice replied. Suzie flattened herself against the outside wall of the shack as the three men walked out through the front door.

“You need to tell us where we're going, before we get on the boat,” Gabriel said with a growl. “I want to know exactly where or you're not making it off this beach.”

“It's about a mile further up the shore,” Paul said quickly. “Trent was going to hide the drugs here, but he thought it was too exposed, so we moved them up further where there are a lot of rocks.”

“Likely story,” Joey growled. “You want to know where I think those drugs are?” he asked with confidence building.

“Fine, genius, where are they?” Gabriel asked impatiently.

“We only know for certain that Trent was in two places. This guy's boat, and that bed and breakfast where he spent the night. My money's on Trent hiding the drugs inside of that old place. It's huge, he'd have plenty of places to hide them. Why would he risk taking them out on the boat when he was already planning on double crossing us?” he demanded.

“No,” Paul said quickly. “Not there. They aren't there, I know it. Don't look there,” he insisted.

“Actually, he has a good point,” Gabriel said. “Maybe Trent just let you think he had the drugs on the boat. It would make sense for him to leave them behind, somewhere he could easily find them when he was ready to take off. He wouldn't be able to drive a boat himself. He wouldn't be able to make it through all the tricky inlets you keep telling us about. I think you're right, Joey, for once. I think those drugs are back at that bed and breakfast.”

Suzie's heart stopped beating for a moment. She thought of Mary back at Dune House, all alone with no way to protect herself. If these two men decided to invade it she would be in grave danger. With her cell phone having no service, and no boat to get back to the mainland, Suzie would have no way to warn her. She was certain that if those men got on the boat, it would mean that Mary would be in danger. Not only Mary, but the young couple who were taking their first trip away from their young baby. These men wouldn't care who they killed in order to get their drugs.

“No,” Paul said firmly again. “I told you, I know where the drugs are. I can take you to them. It has nothing to do with that place.”

“You seem so certain,” Joey said slyly. “Almost too certain. Don't you think, Gabriel?” he asked.

“He is acting a little strange,” Gabriel said. “Are you still trying

to keep those drugs yourself?" he asked Paul sharply.

"No," Paul said again. "Please, I told you. I just want to live. I don't care about the drugs. I just want to get back home, in one piece, so I can continue with my life. We're on the same side here. I want to take you to those drugs, as much as you want to find them."

"If that was the case you would have told us right away," Joey roared. "Instead you've had us roaming all over this water and this beach looking for something you knew wasn't here. Were you hoping we'd get picked up by the coast guard before you had to part ways with the drugs?" he accused.

"You've got it wrong," Paul insisted. Suzie could hear the panic forming in his voice. He was as worried as she was that the two would end up at Dune House. "If you want your drugs I'll take you to them."

"No," Gabriel said slowly. "I think I'm going to go with Joey on this one. It just makes so much more sense that Trent would hide the drugs there. I think we'll take you along for the ride, and if it turns out the drugs aren't there, then you can bring us back to this other place."

"That's not wise," Paul argued.

"Now, he's advising us," Joey laughed. "This guy's playing us, Gabriel. Let me take him out right here. Then we don't have to worry about getting rid of the body."

With Joey's words, Suzie's panic went into full force. She knew that if she didn't do something, Paul would either end up dead, or they would all end up heading for Dune House and she would be left behind with no way to warn anyone. Without much time to think about what she was doing she stood up and walked around the side of the shack. She walked right through the door, knowing each step might be her last.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

“Paul, I've been looking for you everywhere,” Suzie said impatiently as she entered the room. Then she fell silent as the two men turned and pointed their guns directly at her. Paul's eyes were wide and filled with horror as he saw Suzie in the line of fire. “Who are they?” she demanded. “Are you trying to cut me out of the deal?”

“Who are you?” Gabriel growled and released the safety on his gun. His finger was pressing lightly on the trigger, just waiting for a reason to push harder.

“I'm his girlfriend,” Suzie said breathlessly. “I was supposed to meet him here and…”

“Shut up!” Joey screeched. “This is insane. It's like a circus around here!”

“Who is she?” Gabriel growled sharply at Paul.

“She's uh,” Paul hesitated. Suzie knew he was trying to think of a way to protect her. “She's my partner,” he finally said.

“Another partner?” Joey demanded. “I just want the drugs and to get out of this place!”

Gabriel had turned back to glare at Suzie.

“I have the drugs,” Suzie said as she stared into Gabriel's eyes.

“What are you talking about?” he demanded. “How could you have the drugs?”

“Trent was staying at my B&B,” she explained. “I overheard his plans. I knew that he was going to make a lot of money from double crossing you. I needed some money, so I talked to Paul, and we made a plan together, so that we could sell the drugs ourselves.”

“How?” Gabriel asked as he slowly stepped closer to her. As Suzie had hoped he would, Joey turned the gun from Paul, to point it at Suzie.

“Suzie, no,” Paul breathed, his eyes wide with fear.

“We waited until Trent put the drugs on the boat, then the plan was that Paul would find out where he was hiding them. Then we were going to get rid of Trent, but you took care of that before we could,” she reminded them. “Paul was supposed to move the drugs a few times so Trent would have no idea where they really were. We were going to take a trip,” she added wistfully. “Around the world. We were supposed to meet up here, and then go get the drugs from where Paul had hidden them.”

Suzie was putting together the ideas so fast that she wasn't sure if they even made sense. She only knew that if she kept talking, then no one was shooting anyone. If she could just buy enough time until Jason came back for her then he might find them and they might have a chance to escape.

Paul's eyes narrowed sharply. Gabriel turned to look at him and waved the gun in front of his face.

“Is this all true?” he demanded. “Is this why you've been running us all around?”

Paul was silent. Suzie knew that he didn't want her to be involved, but it was too late for that the moment she had stepped inside the shack. He nodded a little and closed his eyes briefly.

“That was a big mistake,” Gabriel growled as he turned back and pointed the gun directly in Suzie's face.

“I see that now,” she said and swallowed thickly. “I didn't realize what powerful men Trent was working with,” she added hoping that a little flattery would ease their anger. “If I had known, I never would have touched the drugs.”

Gabriel glared as he took a final step closer to Suzie.

“You should have known better,” he growled. “Now, you're both going to pay. You first,” he added and his arm tensed.

“No!” Paul shouted. “No, I swear if you shoot her I'll never tell you where your drugs are,” he said desperately. “Please, I'll do anything,” he added.

Gabriel lowered the gun. “Aw how sweet,” he said with annoyance. “A true romantic, willing to give his life for his girlfriend,” he turned back and pointed the gun directly in Paul's face. “Let's see if she'll do the same for you, lover boy.”

“This is getting out of control,” Joey complained. “How are we going to get the drugs if they're dead?”

“We only need one of them alive,” Gabriel snapped. “I'm not getting on the boat with both of them. They might try to plan

something.”

“All right fine,” Joey huffed. “Which one do you want me to take out?”

“We need someone to drive the boat,” Gabriel reminded Joey as if he was an idiot.

“Oh right,” Joey nodded. He grabbed Suzie hard by the arm and started to pull her out of the shack.

“No!” Paul shouted and lunged towards Joey. “No don't!”

Gabriel tackled Paul easily to the ground and placed the gun at his back. “Stay down,” he commanded him.

Suzie was in a full panic. She knew the moment Joey got her outside of the shack she would be dead. She realized that no matter how hard she had tried to save Paul, she had failed.

As Joey pulled Suzie out of the shack they nearly collided with Jason who was running up along the beach. He must have heard all of the shouting. Jason drew his gun and aimed it at Joey.

“Drop your gun,” he snapped sharply. Suzie could barely take a breath she was so terrified. Jason was now in danger as well. She didn't know if he even knew that Gabriel was inside.

Joey started to raise his gun to point it at Suzie who was struggling hard to escape his grasp. When he did, she was able to lunge a short distance from him. Jason shot him in the shoulder that was holding the gun. Joey cried out in pain and dropped the gun. Suzie quickly picked it up, but her hands were shaking. Jason met her eyes in the same moment that Gabriel emerged from the shack.

“Drop them both or he's dead,” Gabriel threatened. Jason had already spun to face Gabriel.

“Lower your weapon,” he commanded Gabriel. Gabriel had his arm around Paul's throat and his gun to Paul's head.

“You drop yours,” he growled back. “Or this guy's a dead man!”

Suzie was trying desperately to hold onto the gun she was pointing at Joey who was writhing on the ground in pain. Gabriel's threat left her even more terrified. Jason held his gun steadily pointed at Gabriel.

“If you pull that trigger you're going next,” Jason said sternly. “I don't think you've come this far just to die in the sand.”

“You don't know anything about it,” Gabriel said in a seething tone. “We're getting on that boat, and if you so much as look in my direction, he goes, and so do you.”

“Let him go,” Suzie demanded. “Or Joey is going to die.”

“You think I care about that?” Gabriel laughed. “We're going to get on the boat,” he said again and began pulling Paul towards it.

“There's no way off this beach if you shoot me,” Paul struggled to say. “A boat's no good if you don't know how to drive it. Think this through, Gabriel. Handcuffs are a lot better than a watery grave.”

“Shut up!” Gabriel insisted. It was clear that he was getting more frustrated and frightened by the moment.

“The coast guard is on its way,” Jason warned him. “The moment you hit the water they will be on top of you. So, how many deaths do you want on your head?” Jason asked. “Because no matter what, you're not getting out of here in anything but handcuffs or a coffin.”

“There is no escape,” Paul croaked out. “It's over, Gabriel.”

“Drop the gun,” Jason demanded. “Just drop the gun and put your hands on your head.”

The expression on Gabriel's face shifted. It went from anger, to a strange look of serenity. For a moment Suzie was certain that he was going to pull the trigger. He pressed the barrel of the gun hard against the side of Paul's head.

“No,” Suzie whispered. “Please don't.”

Paul looked into her eyes. He didn't have to speak for her to know what he was saying. Suzie thought that it would be the last moment they would share. Then abruptly Gabriel lowered the gun. He dropped it to the sand beside him.

“Put your hands up,” Jason ordered him.

Gabriel reluctantly released Paul and raised his hands into the air. Paul lunged away from him and scooped up the gun that was resting in the sand.

“I'm having a rough day,” Gabriel muttered as he placed his hands on the top of his head.

“You aren't the one that got shot!” Joey complained from the ground.

“Get on your knees,” Jason commanded him. As he walked around behind Gabriel to handcuff him, Paul rushed over to Suzie. He took the gun from her trembling hands and held it on Joey.

“Are you okay?” he asked her desperately.

“I should be asking you that,” she said in a trembling whisper.

“I'm only okay if you are,” Paul replied and looked into her eyes

intently. “I can't believe you did that.”

Jason walked over and cuffed Joey who was still moaning and squirming in the sand. He took the gun from Paul. As Jason spoke into his radio requesting backup, Paul led Suzie further away from the two handcuffed men.

“Suzie, you scared the hell out of me,” he said as he grasped her hands tightly. “Why would you ever do something so foolish?”

Suzie frowned as she studied all of the cuts and bruises on Paul's face. “I had no other choice, Paul,” she said. She cleared her throat. “I lo…”

“Suzie, you want to fill me in on what happened here?” Jason interrupted. “I'm going to have a lot to answer for.”

Paul stared at her for a long moment. “What were you saying, Suzie?”

“I need to know what happened,” Jason interrupted again. “The coast guard, Parish PD, and medics are on their way. I'd like to have some clue as to what to tell them when they get here.”

Suzie nodded and glanced away from Paul, though she still held his hand tightly. Between the two of them they explained what had actually happened.

“I had no idea that Trent was involved with drugs,” Paul explained. “Once we were out to sea and we were about to dock he put a gun to my head and told me to turn back the way we had come. He had originally planned to pick up more drugs but he saw two men that he was trying to avoid at the dock. He wanted to go back, get the drugs from where he had stashed them, and make it out of town before they even knew he was missing. But when we reached the marina, these two men were waiting for us there. They boarded the boat. They killed Trent for trying to cross them, and I pretended to be his partner to stay alive. I've been leaving clues everywhere I could, but I didn't really think anyone would find them.”

“I did,” Suzie said softly. She took the seashell out of her pocket and pressed it into Paul's palm. “I knew where to look. I found the log book, too.”

“You're amazing,” Paul said. “But I never expected you to put your life in danger like that.” He was about to say something more when the medics arrived.

“Go get checked out,” Jason insisted.

“Please, Paul,” Suzie asked with concern.

Paul frowned and reluctantly let go of Suzie's hand. He held the shell tightly as he walked over to the medics.

“I'm so glad you got my text,” Suzie said as she turned to face Jason.

“What text?” Jason asked with a frown. “I didn't get any.”

“Then how did you know I was here?” Suzie asked with surprise.

“Mary told me what you were up to,” Jason explained. “She knew that you would try and find Paul. I had a little difficulty finding this place, I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner.”

“I'm just glad you came,” Suzie said with a slight blush rising in her cheeks. “I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't shown up.”

“That's why you shouldn't have gone off on your own in the first place,” Jason reminded her sternly.

“I know, I know,” Suzie agreed. “But I couldn't stand thinking of Paul being injured or trapped somewhere.”

“Believe it or not, I do understand,” Jason said. “I'm just glad Paul is safe and all of this is going to be cleared up.”

The medics finally finished looking Paul over.

“You really should go to the hospital to be checked out,” one of the medics said.

“I'm not going anywhere,” Paul said gruffly. “I'm fine. Just a little roughed up.”

The medic nodded and reluctantly released him.

“I'm officially a free man,” Paul said with a warm smile as he walked over to them.

“Are you sure that's wise, Paul?” Suzie asked with concern as she studied the cuts and bruises on his face.

“Well,” Paul hesitated a moment and looked into her eyes. “I did have to promise them that I had someone to look after me.”

“You certainly do,” Suzie smiled and hugged him gently.

“Your boat is going to have to be searched,” Jason interjected. “I can give you both a ride back to Dune House on the police boat.”

Paul met Jason's eyes and for a long moment the tension brewed between them.

“Are you sure you don't mind?” he asked as he studied Jason.

“Not at all,” Jason replied. “Suzie, when you're ready?” he nodded lightly at her and walked back towards the Parish police boat that was arriving.

“They're going to tear up my baby,” Paul sighed as he passed his

gaze over his boat.

“Paul, are you really okay?” Suzie asked as she took his hand in hers.

“Not really,” he admitted with a deep frown. “Trent might have been a criminal, but he was still just a kid. He got himself into a mess, and I couldn't help him out of it. Besides that, I hired him. What does that say about my judgment?” he asked.

“It says that you're willing to take a chance,” Suzie said softly. “Even on a lost cause. It shows just how much you care.”

“Maybe I just saw myself in him,” he admitted quietly. “I used to be such a wanderer. Sometimes I used to go out on the boat for weeks at a time.”

“So, what has changed?” Suzie asked as she gently touched his cheek, avoiding the bandage that covered one of the cuts on his face.

“Now, I have someone to come home to,” he whispered as he looked into her eyes. “Now, it's hard to stay out on the water without you. Suzie, when that man held a gun to my head, all I could think of was getting home to you.”

“Oh Paul, I have something I have to tell you,” Suzie said and cleared her throat. “Paul I lo…”

“So, where are the drugs?” Officer Brown barked, interrupting Suzie again.

“My best guess is that they are in Dune House,” Paul said with a frown.

“I'll need to get a warrant,” Officer Brown sighed as he passed his gaze over Suzie. Suzie might have been mistaken, but she thought she noted a sense of admiration in his eyes.

“No, you won't,” she said. “You're welcome to search Dune House for the drugs. I ask that you be respectful that we do have guests. I'm sure that if Trent hid the drugs they must have been in the room where he was staying, as the only time he left it was for breakfast.”

“We'll do our best not to cause a commotion,” Officer Brown replied. “As for you, Paul, I'm glad to discover that your girlfriend was absolutely right about you the entire time,” he offered his hand to Paul. Paul stared at it for a long moment, and then reached out and shook it.

“I'm sure you were just doing your job,” Paul said humbly. He wound an arm around Suzie's waist. “Now, if you don't mind, I'd

like to head back to the mainland and get some rest."

"There will be some paperwork we'll need you to do. You can give your statement to Officer Allen on the way back to Garber," Officer Brown said with a small smile. "I think you've earned a little flexibility."

Suzie was surprised by the change in the officer's demeanor. She realized that he had never had anything out for Paul personally, but had been too blind to see anything but the obvious. She nestled close to Paul, careful not to put too much pressure on him, but reveling in the warmth of his grasp. All at once the reality of what had almost happened struck her. She began to shiver, and tears built in her eyes.

"You're safe, Paul," she murmured as she turned her face against him to hide her tears.

"I had to get home to you, Suzie," he replied warmly. "Let's go home," he added as he guided her slowly towards Jason's boat.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12

During the ride back to Dune House, Paul went over the story once more. He held Suzie close, trailing his fingers through her hair. Neither of them would let go of the other for longer than a moment. When they docked at the marina, Paul helped her off the boat.

“When do you think I'll get my boat back?” he asked Jason.

“It may be a few days,” Jason said. “It will need to be processed. I'm sorry for the inconvenience.”

“It's no trouble,” Paul said softly. “It's a good excuse to stick to land for a while.”

Jason nodded. “Let me give you a ride back to Dune House,” he offered.

“No,” Paul shook his head. “It's a lovely evening, we can walk. If you don't mind, Suzie?” he asked. From the warmth in his eyes Suzie could tell that he just wanted to be alone with her. She smiled at the thought and nodded. As they walked from the marina towards Dune House, Paul held her hand firmly in his own.

“Now, what was it you said you had to tell me?” he asked.

Suzie smiled nervously. It had seemed so easy to say it before. She was struggling to get the courage up to speak the words. The sun was setting, painting the sky beautiful shades. They had reached the section of beach in front of Dune House. Suzie could see a young couple walking further down the beach. She presumed they were the guests staying the night at Dune House. They were holding hands, and nestled close, just like Paul and her. She stopped and turned to face him. He looked into her eyes knowingly.

“I'm patient,” he reminded her in a whisper.

“Paul, when I thought I would never see you again…”

“That will never happen,” he assured her. He took both of her hands in his. “Forgive me, Suzie, but I can't wait any longer,” he

said before meeting her lips with his own. The kiss was slow and sensual, it sent shivers up and down along Suzie's spine. As their lips parted, the words tumbled from the tip of her tongue as naturally as the waves flowing to the sand.

“I love you, Paul,” she said and gazed into his eyes.

“I love you too, Suzie,” he replied. “From the moment I met you, and until the end of time,” he kissed her again. Suzie forgot about all of her fears. She forgot about losing herself in romance. All she felt was gratitude that she had been given the chance to speak the truth to the man she loved.

“Suzie?” Mary called out from the path that led down to the beach. “Are you two decent?” Suzie pulled away from Paul and went running towards Mary.

“My hero!” Suzie said as she hugged her. “If you hadn't warned Jason about what I was up to, I don't think Paul or I would be here right now.”

“Some hero,” Mary scoffed. “All I did was cook dinner. Although it is delicious. I hope you're both hungry?” she looked between the two of them.

“Oh yes,” Paul said.

“Absolutely,” Suzie agreed.

“Finally,” Mary laughed. As the three of them walked back towards Dune House, Suzie felt wonderful to finally be heading home. On the porch they met Officer Brown who was stepping out of the house along with some other officers.

“We found the drugs,” he informed Suzie. “You were right, they were hidden in Trent's room. It looks like this will be an easy case to wrap up.”

“The sooner the better,” Paul said as he hugged Suzie around the waist.

“You stay safe,” Officer Brown said sternly.

“Are you sure you're not hungry?” Mary asked with a sweet smile. “There's plenty to eat.”

“No, ma'am,” Officer Brown said respectfully. “I think it's best you have a little peace tonight.”

“All right then,” Mary nodded.

“Now, I want you to tell me just how you found me,” Paul said as he led Suzie into the house. “And, promise me, you will never do it again,” he said sternly.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” Suzie smiled as she pecked his cheek

lightly. “I'd do it a thousand times over, if needed. Bonnie Blue and I can't live without you!”

The End

OceanofPDF.com

DODGY DEALINGS

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 5

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

A swirl in the breeze that carried along the beach made its way up onto the wraparound porch of Dune House. It ruffled the napkins that Suzie was impatiently trying to get settled into place. It stirred the steam rising from the cups of coffee and tea that were set out around a large, circular, wooden table.

“That looks like a losing battle,” Jason said with a chuckle as he walked towards his cousin with his girlfriend's arm hooked through his. Suzie looked up at him with a slight smile and shook her head.

“I thought it would be a nice morning for brunch, but maybe I was mistaken,” she sighed and glanced out over the water. She smiled to cover the touch of worry she felt. Whenever her boyfriend, Paul, was out on his fishing boat, she was a little extra sensitive to the water. Jason grabbed a salt shaker and set it on top of the pile of napkins.

“I think it's perfect,” the woman on Jason's arm smiled. It was hard for Suzie not to think of her as just Dr. Rose, the medical examiner for the small town of Garber. But when she cast her adoring eyes towards Jason, Suzie knew that it might not be long until she was family. This was the first time he was showcasing the fact that he was dating Dr. Rose, and the sight of their shy but happy smiles made Suzie giddy with happiness.

“I'm glad you could make it, Dr. Rose,” Suzie said with a warm smile.

“Please, call me Summer,” Dr. Rose said with a faint blush.

“Summer Rose,” Suzie repeated in a soft voice. “How beautiful.”

“My parents were hippies,” Summer admitted with a hint of embarrassment.

“Or maybe they just knew how beautiful you would be,” Jason suggested and pulled her closer to him. Suzie couldn't help but

smile as the two shared a light kiss. Jason, who had struck her as shy and a little standoffish when she had first arrived in Garber, certainly knew how to woo a woman. She couldn't think of a better woman for him to woo. Summer truly was beautiful, with long, dark blonde hair, a radiant smile, and warm hazel eyes. But her beauty went much deeper than that. She took her job very seriously, and had always made every effort to help Suzie with anything she needed.

The town of Garber had not exactly been receptive when Suzie first inherited one of the oldest and largest properties in the area. Known as Dune House because of its perch on a hill overlooking the local strip of beach, Suzie had taken the opportunity to renovate the large structure and turn it into its former glory as a bed and breakfast. It became a project that she shared with her best friend, Mary, who at the time was leaving a terrible marriage. With Mary's help and Suzie's determination the business was running fairly well, but there had been a few bumps in the road along the way. Now, that things finally seemed to be smoothing out, Suzie was happy to see that Jason was head over heels for a woman who clearly deserved and reflected his affection.

“I've got the bagels!” Mary called out happily as she hurried out of the house with a large tray of bagels and spreads. The sunlight glinted off her auburn hair, highlighting the streaks of gray. Suzie smiled at her friend. Mary had a timeless beauty that she didn't recognize herself, but Suzie appreciated every time she saw her. While Suzie liked to accentuate her features with make-up, stylish haircuts and a youthful, brassy blonde shade of hair, Mary rarely wore a touch of anything and her hair had been the same mid-back length for as long as Suzie had known her. Yet, she always seemed to radiate, to have a subtle glow about her as if the sun sought out her skin. Suzie couldn't have felt closer to her if she had been born from the same mother. They had been through plenty of drama and joy in their lives and no matter how far apart they happened to be they shared every second of it.

“Those look delicious,” Suzie said as she took the tray from Mary and set it down on the table. “Have you seen any sign of Antony and Daria?” she asked.

“Not so far,” Mary shook her head. “They may be sleeping in.”

Antony and Daria were from the nearby town of Parish and had decided to book a room at Dune House for a weekend getaway.

They were a young couple who were very friendly when Suzie had greeted them and shown them to their room. But she had barely seen them since they had arrived the day before. As the four settled down at the table, Jason glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the front of the house.

“Isn't Paul joining us?” he asked when he glanced back at Suzie.

“He's on a run,” Suzie replied with a mild frown. “He's trying to get a few more big hauls before the weather gets too rough.”

“Good thinking,” Jason nodded as he spread some cream cheese on a bagel.

“I think it's so romantic that he goes out there and battles the sea,” Mary said wistfully. Suzie arched an eyebrow and locked eyes briefly with Mary. She had noticed quite a few newly purchased romance novels in her room.

“I think it's more romantic when he's safe on land with me,” Suzie grinned.

“Okay, that is better,” Mary admitted with a short laugh.

“Well, it's always hard when the person you care about works in a dangerous profession,” Summer said with a slight smile. “They are brave of course, but the risk is a little unnerving.”

Jason glanced over at her with a playful smile.

“Lucky for you I work in a tiny little town where nothing much ever happens,” Jason said with a chuckle.

“Enough happens,” Suzie said with a slight shake of her head. “Sometimes the most unexpected things.”

As if to punctuate her words a seagull swooped down from the sky and nearly slammed into the pile of bagels on the table. “No! No! Shoo!” Mary said sharply and waved her hands at the bird until it gave up and flew away.

Everyone at the table was laughing as the sliding glass door opened from the main living room of Dune House. Antony and Daria Gable stepped out onto the porch. Each was dressed in casual but fine clothing, light and airy for their time on the beach. Daria's thick, black curls were tied back and floating against the curve of the back of her neck. Antony's glossy, black hair was combed to the side revealing his flawless olive skin. While Daria was the thicker of the two it was clear that she was muscular and athletic. Antony was slight, and appeared willowy beside his wife, with only an inch or two of height beyond hers. To Suzie they were a perfectly matched pair, especially with the way they smiled at exactly the same time.

“Antony,” Suzie smiled, laughter still lingering in her voice. “Daria, just in time, please join us,” Suzie said warmly and gestured to the empty seats at the table.

“Oh, thank you, but we had a very late night,” Antony replied, his arms wrapped snugly around his wife's waist. “I think we're going to take a slow walk on the beach and hopefully some of this sea air will liven us up.”

“Now, that's the way to enjoy a vacation,” Suzie said with a nod of approval. The couple laughed and nodded in return. As they disappeared onto the beach, Mary and Suzie exchanged sly smiles.

“And what about you two?” Jason asked as he sat back in his chair and brushed the bagel crumbs from his shirt. “What do you have planned for today?”

“I have a puzzle that's been calling my name,” Mary said enthusiastically. “It's of the town of Garber.”

Jason arched an eyebrow. “That sounds thrilling,” he said with just a touch of sarcasm.

“You've never seen her do a puzzle,” Suzie said with a short laugh. “She takes it very seriously.”

“I do,” Mary agreed.

“I might take a walk on the beach, or maybe wander into town and see if there's anything new we need for Dune House,” Suzie shrugged.

“Sounds good,” Jason nodded. “Summer and I are going to the movies later.”

“Lovely,” Suzie smiled.

The waves crashed against the sand, the chatter continued, and Suzie found her mind drifting back to Paul. She was accustomed to being on her own, had spent many years without anything close to a steady relationship. It wasn't loneliness that kept her awake when Paul was out on the water, it was worry. She had seen so much already, and now in her mid-fifties, she found it hard to believe that things could remain so blissful. As was common with most women she knew, she was waiting for the other shoe to drop on the peaceful and fulfilling paradise that her life had become.

“Suzie?” Jason asked.

Suzie realized she must have missed a question, and shook her head. “I'm sorry, Jason, what were you saying?”

“Mary mentioned that Antony and Daria are from Parish,” he said quickly. “I was just wondering why they would choose to stay

here instead of going a little further from home. Did they mention why?"

"They just wanted a local escape," Suzie said with a mild shrug. "Sometimes it doesn't take going across the country to escape, just a little sea air and some distance from the faces you see each day."

"Especially if one of those faces is Detective Brown," Jason said with a slight scowl. Detective Brown was well-known in Parish, and also well-known to Mary and Suzie. They had gotten to know him under less than ideal circumstances when a crime had been committed that involved both Parish and Garber.

"Detective?" Suzie questioned.

"Yes, he got a promotion," Jason said with a hint of resentment. "Just last week apparently."

"Ah, so he outranks you," Suzie laughed and winked at Jason.

"Technically," Jason reluctantly admitted. "But luckily I don't have to work in the same police force as him."

"Yes, that would be awkward," Suzie said with a slight smile. "Working with your nemesis."

"He's not my nemesis," Jason argued with a hint of annoyance. "I don't have a nemesis."

"But if you did, it might be Detective Brown," Mary suggested, joining in on Suzie's playful teasing of Jason.

"Jason, is this true?" Summer asked as she studied him. "Do you have a nemesis?" she inquired in a very serious tone.

"All right, all right," Jason laughed and held up his hands in surrender. "I can't say that we get along very well. But I don't know the man in a personal capacity, I can't say that he's not a good guy. I just know he's pretty difficult to work with. But then the entire Parish police department is difficult to work with."

"Well, lucky for you, I'm sure he won't be spending a weekend here," Suzie grinned.

"I hope not," Jason groaned. Then he gestured to the table. "Can I help you clean up?"

"No, leave it to us," Mary said firmly. "You and Summer go and enjoy your day. I'm sure it's not easy for you to both get a day off at the same time."

"It did take a little bribery," Summer admitted with a wink. "But a girl has to do what a girl has to do."

As Jason and Summer left, Suzie began piling up the plates and gathering the mugs. Mary was wrapping up the remainder of the

bagels.

“It's so sweet to see the two of them together,” she said as she collected a few of the mugs.

“It is,” Suzie agreed. The two made their way into the kitchen to finish cleaning up. “It's always nice to see people genuinely in love, like Antony and Daria. That's quite refreshing.”

“It seems to be,” Mary agreed with a hint of hesitation.

“Hmm? What aren't you telling me?” Suzie demanded as she turned to look at her friend.

“Well, I just happened to overhear a squabble between them last night,” Mary explained with a slight sigh.

“Even the most loving couples fight,” Suzie pointed out.

“I know that, I do,” Mary frowned and then shook her head. “But something about the way they were going back and forth. It was just so cold.”

“Did you hear what they were arguing about?” Suzie asked.

“No, nothing more than a few words before they settled down,” she shrugged. “I guess it couldn't have been too much of an argument.”

“Well, that's a good thing,” Suzie frowned. “I hope they’ve worked things out. If you want to finish up in here I'll go check on their room to see if there's anything needed.”

“Sounds good to me,” Mary agreed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

Suzie walked down the hallway to the room that the Gables were staying in. She knocked lightly, as she always did. It was never worth the risk of walking in on something embarrassing. After unlocking the door she stepped inside. She was immediately confronted with a pungent odor. It was hard to place at first, but it reminded her of rotten fruit. The room was one of their cozy themed rooms complete with a fireplace and extra thick quilts. The walls were decorated with paintings in warm shades of yellow, orange, and red.

Suzie soon found the source of the odor, a tipped over wine bottle that had created a puddle on the floor on the opposite side of the bed. Suzie frowned and reached down to pick up the bottle. It wasn't the first time that guests had left a room in a mess, but it wasn't something that she had expected from Antony and Daria. After disposing of the bottle and soaking up the mess on the carpet she walked over to the closet where a small carpet cleaner was stowed. As she was about to turn the knob on the closet door, she noticed that the door was already slightly open. She grasped the knob, ready to pull it open, when she heard Mary calling her from downstairs.

“Suzie, your phone is ringing!”

Suzie's heart jumped. She hoped it might be Paul saying that he was coming home early. She hurried out of the room to retrieve her cell phone.

“Hello?” she said warmly.

“Hello, beautiful,” Paul replied, his voice as strong and steady as always.

“How is your trip going?” Suzie asked.

“It's been slow,” Paul admitted. “I'm hoping to come up with a

substantial haul tonight."

Suzie did her best to hide her disappointment. "I'm sure you'll have better luck."

"Sometimes it takes all of my willpower to keep from turning this boat around and coming back to you," Paul admitted abruptly. Suddenly, Suzie realized that he wasn't just calling to pass the time. He was calling because he missed her.

"Well, that would certainly save me the swim that I've been contemplating," Suzie said with a laugh.

"Sharks, don't forget about the sharks," he warned and the sound of his soft chuckle was enough to warm Suzie from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

"Come home soon," she murmured.

"I'll be there just as soon as I can," he assured her. "Love you, Suzie."

"Love you, too, Paul," Suzie said before hanging up the phone. It still made her heart flutter to say those words. She was so distracted with thoughts of Paul that she almost forgot about the stain on the carpet waiting for her.

Suzie headed back to the room. As soon as she stepped inside, the hair on the back of her neck stood up. She couldn't pinpoint why, but she was suddenly frightened. After a few moments of standing in the doorway, she realized what was wrong. The door to the closet, that she was certain she hadn't opened, was standing wide open. The window beside it, that she was sure had been closed when she had walked into the room, was wide open. The curtains were blowing lazily through it.

Suzie couldn't bring herself to move. She felt frozen to the floor, as she realized what might have just happened. The closet door had been slightly open when she had reached for it. Was it possible that someone had been hiding inside? The same person who had spilled the bottle of wine, which had been positioned not far from the window. If someone had climbed in, the bottle could have easily been kicked over.

With her heart racing, Suzie forced herself to take a further step into the room. Almost immediately she began rationalizing what she was observing. She might have been so distracted by the spilled wine that she didn't notice the window being open. She might have opened the closet door before she went to answer her phone. Maybe she had opened it just enough that the door had swung open on its

own or from a gentle nudge of a breeze through the window. She walked over to the window and looked outside to see if anyone was there but there wasn't anyone to be seen. She closed the window part of the way but decided to leave it open slightly to try and get the smell of the wine out of the room. She turned back to the closet and pulled out the carpet cleaner.

As Suzie was sucking up the excess liquid from the carpet, her mind drifted right back to her first instinct. If the window had been open, the scent of the spilled wine would not have been so strong. As she put the carpet cleaner away, she peered into the bottom of the closet to see if there was any evidence of someone having hidden inside. She didn't see anything at first and was sliding the carpet cleaner back into the closet, when she noticed a faint scent. It was the scent of wine. Suzie crouched down and ran her fingertips lightly over the wooden floor of the closet. When she lifted her fingers she could see the moisture on them. She sniffed her fingertips. It was definitely wine. Even if it really had been Antony and Daria who had spilled the wine, there would be no reason for them to have tracked it into the closet which was strictly for storage. She stood back up and cast her gaze over the room again. There was no sign of anything being out of place. It didn't appear as if the Gables' bags had been rifled through.

Once more Suzie began doubting what she suspected had happened. She was tempted to call Jason and have him come over to check it out, but she knew it was his one rare day off with Summer. She decided that she would ask Daria and Antony when they returned if they had spilled the wine. If they had, then her suspicions were obviously off base. If they hadn't, then she would insist they switch rooms just to be cautious. She walked back into the kitchen to find Mary standing in front of the sink. The water was crashing into the stainless steel tub but nothing was being washed.

"Mary?" Suzie asked as she stepped up beside her. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Mary nodded and blinked as if she was being summoned from a deep thought. She shook her head a little and began washing the breakfast dishes.

"I think someone might have been in the Gables' room," Suzie said as she picked up a towel to dry the dishes that Mary was washing.

“What makes you think that?” Mary asked and passed her a plate.

“I could have sworn the window was closed when I first walked in, and when I walked in a second time, it was wide open,” she frowned.

“Well, you might have been mistaken,” Mary suggested. “Why would anyone want to break into their room?”

“I honestly don't know,” Suzie replied and sighed. “You're probably right, I'm sure it was nothing.”

“It seems to be the day for strange sightings,” Mary said with a slight frown. “I was looking out across the beach and I could have sworn that I saw a man walking across it in full business attire, shoes and everything. I glanced away for a moment, and then when I looked back he was gone.”

“Odd,” Suzie frowned and finished drying the plate. She opened the cabinet to put it away, and heard the sound of the front door opening and closing. “That must be Antony and Daria now,” she said and walked towards the entrance to cut them off before they reached their room. However, when she stepped into the main living room just beside the entrance of the house, there was no one to be seen. The door was closed, and there was no sign of anyone having walked in.

“Mary, did you hear the door open and close, too?” Suzie asked. Mary had just stepped out of the kitchen.

“I did,” Mary nodded.

“But there's no one here,” Suzie frowned. “I'm going to do a walk around the property, something is definitely not right.”

“Make sure that you have your phone with you,” Mary warned.

“I do,” Suzie promised.

Suzie stepped out onto the porch, where she noticed that Daria was sitting at one of the small, wooden picnic tables. She had a piece of paper and a pen. She was hunched over the paper, and scribbling away with the pen. Suzie breathed a sigh of relief as she realized that she must have been mistaken. Maybe it had only been Antony who walked inside, and she simply missed him. All of her paranoia was making her begin to question her own sanity.

“Hi Daria,” she said cheerfully. “Did you have a nice walk?”

“Yes, we did,” Daria replied as she smiled up at Suzie. “Antony's just taking a shower.”

“Daria, I need to ask you something, but please understand it's

not that I'm upset…" Suzie began to explain, but she was interrupted by Daria.

"Is it about the wine?" she asked and shook her head. "Sorry about that. I don't know how the bottle got tipped over. I saw the mess this morning and meant to clean it up, but we got caught up in our day and it just slipped my mind. I understand if you need to charge us extra."

"No, don't worry about that," Suzie assured her. "But did you happen to leave the window open?"

"I'm not sure," Daria replied honestly. "Everything from this morning is a bit of a blur. We were so tired from last night. I think we had too much fun."

"That's what time away is for," Suzie assured her with a short laugh. She was beginning to think that she was the one that was in the blur, considering that she had turned one spilled bottle of wine into a masked intruder. "Would you like some wine now?"

"That would be perfect," Daria nodded.

"I'll be back in a few moments," Suzie said. As she stepped back into the house she was still feeling foolish for misconstruing what she had seen inside the Gables' room. She grabbed a fresh bottle of wine and opened it. Then she snatched up two glasses. As she walked back towards the door, Antony stepped out of his room. His hair was still damp and clung to his skin.

"Hello Antony, Daria's on the porch if you'd like to join her for some wine," Suzie suggested.

"Wonderful," he nodded. "I have to say this is one of the most relaxing trips that we've ever taken."

"I'm glad," Suzie said as she walked with him out onto the porch.

Antony settled on the bench across from Daria. He smiled at her as he watched her scribbling away on the paper.

"What's that you're writing?" Suzie asked curiously as she filled their glasses of wine.

"Oh, it's our wish list," Daria replied with a warm smile as she set the pen down on the table.

"Our Paris wish list," Antony added. "All of the places we absolutely have to see when we visit Paris."

"What a great idea to pre-plan it," Suzie said. "Do you have a trip planned soon?"

"Yes, we leave in a couple of days," Antony replied. "It will be

our first international trip together."

"How exciting? It's important to plan it before you go," Suzie said with a nod. She found it a bit strange that they would have a weekend away before an international trip but she thought it would be rude to question them about it. "I was in Paris once to cover a story, but I didn't have time for much sightseeing. One day I hope to go back and explore what I missed. So, take your time and enjoy it."

"We will," Daria said with excitement in her voice. "I'm really looking forward to it."

"Let me know if you need anything else," Suzie said gently. "I'll just be in the kitchen."

"I think we'll be fine," Antony replied and reached across the table to take Daria's hand in his. Suzie couldn't help but admire the obvious affection between the two as the afternoon light danced over their intertwined fingers.

"Okay then, enjoy the wine," Suzie said gently. "It's warm now, but it's supposed to get pretty chilly."

"Thank you," Daria smiled, but she didn't look away from Antony's eyes.

After hosting dinner for Daria and Antony, Suzie and Mary retired to their rooms. Antony and Daria would be checking out the next day, and Suzie was looking forward to Paul getting back from his trip the next evening. She glanced at her phone once before laying down. She hadn't heard from him since his call earlier in the day, but that wasn't unusual. Out on the boat, cell phone service could be spotty.

As Suzie lay down on her bed, she heard the howl of the wind outside the window. She shivered despite being buried under blankets. She wondered just how strong the wind would get, and

how low the temperature would drop. After trying to sleep for about an hour, Suzie heard a strange sound coming from the deck outside her window. Suzie wandered out of her room with a wide yawn. She could hear something rolling around on the deck. She knew that the wind must have picked up quite a bit. She tugged her robe tightly around her and added a long trench coat. She wasn't accustomed to the cold after spending a luxurious summer in the balmy heat that the beach offered.

As she walked out onto the deck, she spotted the empty flower pots that seemed to be engaged in a strange game of chase. She began collecting the plastic pots, when she heard voices drifting from the house. Out of natural curiosity and years as an investigative reporter, Suzie listened closely.

“I just think it's time,” she heard Antony say. “Do you really want to live the rest of our lives like this, Daria? We could just get out of it, be done with it once and for all.”

“As if it's that simple,” Daria challenged him. Suzie's ears perked up. The fog cleared from her sleepy mind. She could hear the fear in Daria's voice. “Antony, you know better than that.”

“It has to be done,” Antony said firmly.

“Antony, if you do anything to hurt my family, I'll kill you myself!” Daria shot back.

Suzie froze. Her heart skipped a beat. She hated to hear anyone threatened with bodily harm. But a moment later she was second-guessing herself. They were a young couple going on their first international trip, and Suzie was hearing everything out of context. She listened a moment longer and heard their voices soften. What had been escalating now sounded as if it had been muted. She lingered a little while longer, just to be sure the arguing didn't begin again, then she tucked the flower pots she had collected behind a stack of chairs. Just before she stepped back inside she glanced out over the water. She wondered if Paul was battling stronger waves because of the wind that was picking up.

After returning to her room, she found that her cell phone screen was glowing. She picked up the phone and found a text from Paul.

Sorry. The waves are a bit rough tonight. I'm going to stay out another night. I will be dreaming of you.

Suzie sighed and sat down on the edge of her bed. Longing for someone was new to her. At times it was beautiful, at other times it was torturous. She sent back a text and then curled up snugly in her bed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

When Suzie woke the next morning, she was relieved to see that the wind had died down. She dressed and headed to the front desk as she expected the Gables would be checking out within the next few hours. She could smell the coffee that Mary was already brewing. She took a look out through the sliding glass doors and spotted Mary leaning against the wooden railing of the porch, gazing out at the water. Suzie often found her this way, lost in thought, and she had learned to allow her to have those few moments of peace in the mornings. Suzie knew she was still trying to piece herself back together. She sometimes felt as if she could just fix everything with a few reassuring comments, but the truth was, Mary had given many years to her husband, and it would take time for her to heal completely.

Suzie settled behind the front desk and turned the computer on. Just as she was about to pull up the account, she noticed something sitting on the desk. It was a folded up piece of paper. When she opened it, she saw that it contained some money, as well as the room key from the Gables' room. She lifted the piece of paper to read the note, just as Mary was stepping back inside.

"It looks like Antony and Daria had to leave for Paris earlier than planned," Suzie explained after skimming through the letter. "They've left the money for their stay and their room key."

"Oh, what a shame, I was looking forward to wishing them a safe and happy trip," Mary said. Then she walked towards the kitchen. "Would you like some coffee, Suzie?"

"Always," Suzie replied with a hint of distraction in her voice. She read over the note again. It gave no explanation as to why they had to leave so early for a vacation. She found it just a little strange. But with a slight shake of her head she closed out their

transaction and returned the room key to the hook on the wall behind her.

“Here you go,” Mary handed her a steaming cup of coffee as Suzie turned back.

“I guess we have the day free once I tidy up their room,” Suzie said with a sigh.

“You don't seem thrilled about that,” Mary asked with a frown. “Is something wrong?”

“Not really,” Suzie shook her head. “I just got a text last night that Paul is going to stay out another night.”

“Oh, I'm sorry,” Mary frowned. “I know how much you miss him.”

“Is it that obvious?” Suzie asked fretfully. “I've never been so preoccupied with a man before.”

“Welcome to love, my darling Suzie,” Mary smiled dreamily. “It takes over your life.”

“I'm not sure if I like it,” Suzie admitted and took a sip of her coffee.

“Oh, you will like it just fine when he gets home,” Mary laughed knowingly.

“I guess you're right,” Suzie replied with a slight shrug.

“Why don't you and I take a walk along the country road today?” Mary suggested. “We haven't done that in some time.”

Suzie smiled warmly. “I'd like that. I'll clean up the room and we can set out after.”

“Sounds good,” Mary nodded. “I think we could both use some fresh air.”

When Suzie stepped into the Gables’ room, the first thing she noticed was how chilly it was. She immediately looked towards the window which she realized was wide open. She frowned as she

walked over to the window. It seemed odd to her that it would be left open. But then she assumed that perhaps the scent of the wine was still lingering on the carpet. As she closed the window she noticed something sticking out from under the bed. She crouched down to take a closer look. It was small and black, it looked a little like a wallet. When she opened it she discovered Antony's face looking up at her. Her heart began to race as she realized that this was Antony's passport. Had he misplaced it? How would he get on the plane to France? Suzie frowned as she picked it up and glanced over the room again. Just like the day before she felt a little uneasy in the room.

Suzie grabbed the wastebasket which was beside a small table and chairs in the corner. She carried it to the larger trash can in the kitchen. As she was dumping out the contents she noticed the list of the places Antony and Daria intended to visit in France. It seemed strange to Suzie that after writing the list, Daria had simply thrown it out. She frowned as she studied it. There was something about it that was nagging at her. She couldn't quite place it.

“I definitely need some fresh air,” she said with a shake of her head and tossed the list into the garbage can. It was clear that she was still feeling a little paranoid. She walked over to the front desk where Mary was fielding a phone call from a future guest. Once she hung up the phone Suzie set the passport down on the desk.

“I think that Antony and Daria will be back for this,” she said. “Do we have a number on file that we could call to let them know that we found it?”

“Oh dear that's not good,” Mary said as she looked at the passport. “I'm sure we have their cell phone numbers,” she tapped the keyboard to bring up the account. “Yes, I'll just give them a quick call. I hope this didn't make them miss their flight.”

“Do you still have that note that Daria wrote?” Suzie asked as Mary dialed the cell phone number.

“Yes, I have it in the drawer,” Mary said and opened the drawer. She handed the note to Suzie. Suzie scanned it quickly to see if they had left another number where they could reach them. There was not a phone number, however there was something that struck Suzie as strange. The handwriting on the note she was reading was nothing like the handwriting that she had seen on the list that Daria had created of places to visit. However, the note was signed by Daria, and Suzie had seen her writing the list. If Daria had written

both notes it seemed very odd that the handwriting was so different.

“Both of their numbers have gone straight to voicemail,” Mary said with a frown. “Maybe they're on the plane.”

“How could they be without Antony's passport?” Suzie shook her head.

“Well, we did all we could,” Mary said. “I left them both messages to call us about the passport we found.”

Suzie nodded and stared down at the note for a few more moments. Perhaps Antony had written the note and Daria had signed it. She handed the note back to Mary to put into the drawer. Once Mary had shut it, she tilted her head towards the door.

“Are you ready for that walk?” she asked.

“Yes,” Suzie said with a sigh of relief. “I think I definitely need something to distract me.”

“Still worried about Paul?” Mary asked as she and Suzie walked towards the door.

“I think a little,” Suzie nodded. She didn't want to admit that she was all but convinced that someone had been inside the Gables’ room. With her history as an investigative reporter she was often seeing conspiracies where there weren't any, so she had learned to keep her theories to herself until she had some kind of proof.

As soon as they were outside Suzie began to feel a little better. The air was crisp, which was refreshing. She linked her arm through Mary's and together they began walking towards the country road. The country road was not one that was frequented by many. In fact Suzie only knew of it because Paul had taken her down it to a clearing so that they could share a picnic. Not too many cars traveled on it which made it a perfect place to just enjoy a stroll. It wound its way down the hill on the opposite side of the beach. It was a mixture of trees, brush, and sandy soil. The road was not even paved. Occasionally, Suzie heard the sounds of ATVs or dirt bikes buzzing down the road, but even that was fairly rare.

“It's beautiful out,” Suzie said with a relaxing sigh.

“I do like the change of weather,” Mary agreed. “Although, I will miss the warm water.”

“It won't be cold for long,” Suzie reminded her.

“Suzie, stop!” Mary suddenly gasped and grasped Suzie's arm tightly.

“What? Why?” Suzie asked, her nerves immediately on edge.

She was already on high alert because of her suspicions about someone being in the Gables' room, so the urgency in Mary's voice sent her heart racing.

"Look, there!" Mary said and pointed rigidly towards the tall grass that lined the edge of the road. Suzie braced herself for what she might see. As she turned to look, a white rabbit bounded its way out of the tall grass. It paused once to wiggle its whiskers at Suzie, before hopping off.

"A rabbit?" Suzie asked with annoyance. "Mary, you frightened me!"

"I frightened you?" Mary laughed a little and gave Suzie a strange look. "You're not afraid of anything, Suzie, what's going on with you?"

Suzie sighed and shook her head. "I honestly can't say. I've just been feeling uneasy, as if there is something I should be paying attention to, but I don't know what it is."

"Maybe it's just Paul being away," Mary suggested as they began walking again.

"Maybe," Suzie replied. The pair fell into silence as they continued down the road. A few minutes later, Mary grabbed Suzie's arm again.

"What is that?" she stumbled out.

"What?" Suzie asked skeptically.

"There," Mary said as she pointed through the tall grass along the side of the road.

"I still don't see anything," Suzie said with a shrug and narrowed her eyes. "If it's another rabbit, I'm going to be annoyed."

"It's not," Mary promised. She unwound her arm from Suzie's. Mary gestured to Suzie to be quiet as she walked closer to the side of the road. "Oh, it's a car!" she gasped. Suzie's eyes widened at Mary's words. It was unusual enough to see a car on the road, let alone to see one hidden on the side of the road.

"What?" she walked up behind Mary quickly. Half on the road and half in the ditch beside it, was a car. A car that Suzie recognized. "Doesn't that look like the car that Antony and Daria were driving?" she asked breathlessly.

"It does," Mary agreed as she began edging her way closer to the car.

"Careful, Mary," Suzie warned. "If there's been some kind of accident who knows what could be leaking from the engine."

“Oh no,” Mary whispered. Suzie frowned as she followed Mary's line of vision. She gasped sharply when she saw the figure of a man slumped over the steering wheel.

“It's Antony,” Suzie said as her heart sank. She pulled out her cell phone. “I'll call for help.”

“I think it's far too late,” Mary said quietly as she studied the body. “It looks like he's been gone for a little while.”

Suzie made her way to the other side of the car as she filled in the 911 operator on what they had found. She was dreading the possibility of finding Daria dead in the passenger side of the vehicle. She sighed with relief when she saw that the passenger seat was vacant.

“She's not here,” she said to Mary. “Daria's not here.”

Mary closed her eyes briefly with an expression of relief.

“Help is on its way,” Suzie said as she hung up her phone. “I just don't understand. What was Antony doing out here in the first place? Where is Daria?”

“I don't know, Suzie, but I think something very strange happened here. Why would they claim to be leaving early for Paris, without Antony's passport, only to end up separated with Antony dead on the side of the road?”

“It doesn't make sense,” Suzie shook her head. Her eyes were lingering on something. It looked as if there was a pair of reading glasses crushed into the dirt beside the car. She shrugged. “I remember they had a bit of a spat. Maybe things got worse after they left. Maybe Daria is safe and sound somewhere else, and Antony was so upset he drove off the road,” she frowned and glanced up at the flashing lights that were approaching on the road beside them. Suzie had no doubt it would be Jason, and his partner, Kirk Rondella. The squad car was parked, and Jason stepped out of the driver's side. He squinted against the sunlight as he walked quickly towards Suzie. Kirk followed after him, his gaze sweeping the surroundings as if he was memorizing everything he saw.

“Suzie, we got a call about an accident?” Jason said grimly. “Are you and Mary okay?”

“We're fine,” Mary assured him. “I'm afraid our guest, Antony Gable, is not though.”

“Jason, we've got a DOA,” Kirk called from beside the car in the brush. Suzie was a little startled that Kirk had been able to move that fast without her noticing. She didn't know him very well, as he

was quite new to the force, but he seemed to have the art of being stealthy down to a science. An ambulance made its way cautiously down the road. Suzie grimaced and hoped that it wouldn't get stuck.

“Did you hear the crash?” Jason asked as he pulled out his notepad.

“No,” Suzie shook her head. “We were just out for a walk, and Mary noticed the car.”

“He's supposed to be on his way to France,” Mary said, her voice softened by shock. “We didn't even see him this morning, they left a note that they were checking out.”

While Kirk supervised the medics to make sure that no evidence was compromised, Jason continued to ask them questions.

“So, you didn't actually see them leave?” he asked. “Do you have any idea where his wife is?”

“No,” Suzie shook her head. “When I woke up this morning there was a note on the front desk along with their key and their payment.”

“Excuse me,” one of the paramedics interrupted.

“Yes?” Jason asked.

“We're turning this over to the medical examiner,” the paramedic explained.

“Do you think it's possible that Daria could be somewhere in the woods, hurt?” Suzie asked with urgency. “Maybe she was thrown from the car?”

“The door was closed, and there's no sign of someone being thrown,” the medic said quietly.

“Kirk,” Jason called out.

“Yes?” Kirk asked as he stood up from beside the car. He seemed to have been inspecting the undercarriage.

“Can you do a sweep a few feet into the woods and see if there are any signs of a second victim?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Kirk nodded and began moving slowly through the woods.

“If there's anything to find, Kirk will find it,” Jason said with confidence. “He has eyes like a hawk.”

As the ambulance pulled away, Jason began slowly walking along the road, back and forth. He was studying the dirt. Jason crouched down beside the skid mark in the road. He studied it for a long moment. Then he ran his fingertips lightly over it.

“I didn't find anything,” Kirk said as he emerged from the woods and walked over to Jason.

“I think I did,” Jason said thoughtfully.

“What is it?” Kirk asked as he leaned down to get a closer look.

“I don't think this was a simple case of losing concentration on the road,” Jason said grimly. “The way these marks have been made makes it seem as if the driver was swerving to avoid hitting something.”

“Something like what?” Mary asked as she glanced around.

“Maybe an animal of some kind,” Kirk suggested. “Something might have bolted out in front of him.”

“Maybe,” Jason nodded. “It looks like the driver suddenly turned very hard. Maybe for a person, or a large vehicle headed towards them.”

“A person,” Suzie said with a gasp. “I bet that's it. I wonder if it was Daria standing in the road. Maybe she was trying to keep him from leaving. The poor girl must have run off when she realized what damage she had caused.”

“It's possible,” Jason nodded. “But at this point we can't rule out anything. We'll know more once Dr. Rose has a chance to look at the body.”

“In the meantime, our focus should be on finding Daria,” Mary said with sadness. “Whether or not she was involved in some way with the accident, she has lost her husband, and she should not be by herself.”

“Do you think she would have gone back to the bed and breakfast?” Suzie suggested.

“It's possible,” Jason nodded. “Why don't you two head back and check things out. Call me with any information you have about Antony and Daria, phone numbers, addresses. The faster we are able to notify the family, the better. You know how quickly this type of news spreads in a small town.”

“We'll call you as soon as we get back,” Mary said quickly.

“Thanks,” Jason nodded. “Make sure no one goes in their room at Dune House, I'll be sending some technicians over to analyze it.”

“Okay,” Mary agreed. “We don't have any other guests right now anyway,” she added.

Jason's expression shifted to one of concern. “Listen, until we know exactly what happened here, you both need to be cautious.”

“Why?” Suzie asked as she turned back towards him. “It was just

an accident."

"Maybe," Jason narrowed his eyes as he looked back at the wreckage of the vehicle. "But something about it just doesn't feel right. Just keep an eye out for anyone suspicious around town, or anyone hanging out around Dune House."

"Will do," Mary assured him and hooked her arm through Suzie's. As they began walking back towards Dune House, Mary spoke to her in a soft whisper. "It is pretty strange when you think about it," she said. "I know I overheard a little argument between them, but they seemed so in love and ready to travel to Paris, what could have driven them apart?"

Suzie hesitated a moment as she recalled the fight she had overheard between Daria and Antony. "They had their moments," Suzie replied. "I also thought it was just a lover's spat I heard, but maybe there was something more to it."

"Something more to what? What did you hear?" Mary asked.

"Last night the pots were being blown around on the deck, so I went to gather them," Suzie explained. "While I was outside I overheard Antony and Daria arguing. She said something about him hurting her family and then told him she would kill him if he did."

"What?" Mary asked and started to spin on her heel. "We have to tell Jason about that right now."

"No, Mary wait," Suzie said swiftly and tightened her grasp on her arm. "I don't want to tell Jason. Not just yet at least."

"Why not?" Mary demanded. "If Daria did something to hurt Antony…"

"But we don't know that," Suzie insisted. "It was a car accident, what could she have done to hurt him?" she pointed out. "She said something in the heat of the moment, we've all done that, but if we tell Jason about the fight, he might assume that Daria was involved. I just don't think it's possible. Do you?"

"I wouldn't think so," Mary agreed. "Still," Mary frowned. "It doesn't seem like a good idea to keep it from Jason. Especially, seeing as I also heard them fighting the night before."

"Think about it, Mary, can you honestly tell me that you and Kent never got into a heated argument, never said anything you wished you could take back later?" Suzie frowned.

"Well Kent," Mary cleared her throat. "He could be cruel."

Suzie fell silent as she realized she had used a bad example. She knew how abusive Kent had been to Mary throughout their

marriage, and only then realized that it was insensitive of her to bring it up.

“I'm sorry, Mary, I shouldn't have said that…”

“No, you're right,” Mary said and sighed. “I can't tell you how many times I thought about hurting him, or threatening him, I would never follow through with it. I know what you mean. It wouldn't be right to point the finger at Daria without knowing more information.”

“I don't want Daria to lose her husband, and be under suspicion for his death, all because I listened in on one argument,” Suzie explained. “Besides they only raised their voices for a few moments, then everything quieted right back down. I don't think they were still angry at each other.”

“I think the real key is why did they leave early?” Mary said as they reached the parking lot for Dune House. “It seemed odd to me that they would just leave a note. Maybe Jason could call the airport and find out if their flight had been bumped up.”

“Good thought,” Suzie nodded. “I'll mention it when I call him with their information.”

After Suzie brought up the Gables’ file she printed out the information and picked up the desk phone. She dialed Jason's phone number. He answered quickly.

“Do you have their information for me?” he asked with some urgency in his voice.

Suzie gave him the information she had collected when the Gables’ registered which included a single address and their two phone numbers.

“I'm afraid that's all I have,” Suzie said with a frown. “I'm not sure that it will help much.”

“The important thing is that we find family,” Jason explained. “Summer is working on the body right now, so hopefully she'll have some more information for us soon.”

“Maybe you could check if their flights were changed,” she suggested.

“We’re already working on it, but from what we can tell their flight was never changed,” Jason said.

“That’s weird,” Suzie said softly.

“We are still looking into it, maybe they booked another flight. Is there anything else you remember about Antony and Daria that might be helpful to the case?” Jason asked. Suzie hesitated. She

considered sharing with him the information about the fight but she still didn't want to get Daria in trouble because of her eavesdropping.

“I can't think of anything right now,” she said softly. “Have you had any luck finding Daria?”

“I've checked her credit cards and cell phone activity,” Jason replied. “There hasn't been any activity since yesterday. The last place her credit card was used was Freeland’s Fudge.”

“Harry's place,” Suzie said swiftly. She was going into town with Mary anyway so she thought she would pop in and try to find out if he remembered anything about seeing her yesterday.

Suzie reached into the drawer to put the printout of the Gables’ registration information away and as she was pulling her hand out her fingertips swept over the note that was still stashed there.

“Did you find out anything else,” Suzie asked.

“No, that’s it” Jason replied.

Suzie remembered about the handwriting on the note and thought about telling Jason about it but she hesitated and before she could he had already hung up. Suzie settled the desk phone back into its cradle and looked up as Mary walked into the room.

“Mary, I think this might be a bigger situation than we originally thought,” she said grimly.

“Why do you think that?” Mary asked. “I didn't find anything unusual in the room, but I locked it up for Jason to look over later.”

“See this note,” Suzie said and spread it out on the desk.

“Right, the one they left this morning,” Mary nodded.

“But it's not in Daria's handwriting,” Suzie insisted. “I noticed it earlier, but I just assumed that maybe Antony had written it, and Daria had signed it. Now with Antony dead, and the circumstances so strange, I'm starting to wonder.”

“You think someone else could have left the note?” Mary asked with concern.

“Yesterday, when I checked their room for cleaning, I found spilled wine. I left the room to answer my phone but when I came back the window was open. I thought maybe someone had been in the room. But I figured I was just imagining things. Then this morning I found the window open again,” Suzie frowned. “Now, we've found Antony dead, Daria is missing, this note looks even more suspicious.”

“I think you're right,” Mary agreed softly. “Something isn't

right.”

“Our first step to figuring this out has to be finding Daria,” Suzie said. “I say we go into town and ask around. Someone must have seen something.”

“Wait a minute,” Mary suddenly gasped. “At the same time you were cleaning their room yesterday, I saw that man outside on the beach.”

“You're right,” Suzie nodded sharply. “I remember now. Maybe he was the one that was in the room.”

“We need to make sure that everything is locked up tight,” Mary said. “If someone was able to sneak into the room then they might come back.”

The two split up to check every window and door in the B & B. As Suzie went through each finely decorated room, she tried to piece together what might have happened. If there was a third person involved, could it have been Daria's lover? If so, why go to the lengths of leaving the note, but then leave behind the passport? Nothing Suzie thought of made sense. Her mind traveled back to the conversation she had overheard. Could this have something to do with Daria's family? When she and Mary met by the front door, Mary had the keys to the car and her purse slung over her shoulder.

“We need to get to the bottom of this,” Mary said. “We have guests coming in soon, and I wouldn't feel right about letting them stay here if someone has been sneaking in and out.”

“What if someone wasn't sneaking?” Suzie suggested as they stepped out of the house. Mary turned back to lock the front door. “What if Daria let them in?”

“Do you think she would?” Mary asked with shock in her voice as they settled into the car.

“When it comes to matters of the heart, I think anything is possible,” Suzie said darkly. “Maybe Daria wanted to take that trip with another man.”

“Maybe,” Mary said as she pulled out of the parking lot. She drove towards the center of town.

“You don't seem convinced,” Suzie said.

“Just something about the way Daria and Antony looked at each other,” Mary explained. “It was so loving. I'd just hate to think that it wasn't genuine.”

“Some people are very good actors,” Suzie reminded her.

“Sure,” Mary agreed. “But that's something very difficult to

fake.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

Freeland's Fudge was in a strip of shops that ran along the main street. After parking near the police station, Suzie and Mary walked to the shop. The sign in the window said closed, but Suzie could see someone moving around inside.

“Let's see if we can get him to open up,” Suzie said. She tapped lightly on the door. No one came to unlock it. Suzie sighed.

“Maybe we should just go,” Mary said.

“Wait, let me try calling him,” Suzie suggested. She pulled out her phone and dialed the number printed on the window of the shop. After the third ring someone answered.

“Freeland's Fudge, Harry speaking,” the voice said crisply.

“Harry, this is Suzie Allen, I run the bed and breakfast, Dune House,” she explained quickly.

“Oh yes, of course,” he said. “How are you, Suzie?”

“I'm fine, but I have a guest that is just dying for the best fudge in town and I know that has to be your fudge. Unfortunately, I need it as fast as possible, any chance I could sneak in and purchase a box?” she asked hopefully.

“Of course, come on down I will open up a little early for you,” Harry said quickly.

“I'm already here,” Suzie replied cheerfully and waved through the window.

“Just one moment,” Harry said before hanging up the phone. Mary gave Suzie a look. Suzie smiled back innocently as she tucked her cell phone away. Harry unlocked the door and welcomed them into the store.

“What kind of fudge is your guest looking for?” he asked as he walked over to the counter.

“Peanut butter,” Suzie replied warmly. “Thank you so much for

doing this, you're a real life saver."

"Is this for that couple that is staying at your place?" Harry asked curiously as he packaged up a box of peanut butter fudge. "The young woman liked the fudge very much."

"Daria?" Suzie asked as she handed over her credit card.

"Yes, I think that is her name," Harry nodded and rang up the sale.

"Has she been in here since yesterday?" Suzie asked.

"No, in fact, they left so quickly when they did come that I didn't even get to give her the receipt for her purchase," he frowned and then lowered his voice. "I try to stay out of other people's business but, that man she was with, he was very gruff with her."

"Gruff how?" Mary asked.

"He kept rushing her. Everything was fine, then his phone rang, and all of a sudden he was trying to get her to leave as fast as he could," he sighed. "I was hoping to make a bigger sale."

"Do you remember if either of them said anything about where they were going?" Suzie asked.

"Actually no," he shook his head. "I asked her if everything was all right, and she smiled at me and said everything was fine," he shrugged. "Are they in some kind of trouble?"

"We're not sure," Mary replied. "Please do call us if you happen to hear from or see Daria, okay?"

"Sure," he nodded. Suzie slid a business card across the counter to him.

"Thank you for the fudge," she said as they walked out. As soon as they were outside, Suzie glanced over at Mary with a troubled frown.

"This is getting more suspicious by the moment."

"I know," Mary glanced up and down the street. "I wonder where they were heading off to in such a rush."

They walked back to their car and saw Jason standing outside the police station talking on the phone. As they walked past him he hung up.

"I have to go to the medical examiner's office?" Jason said.

"Why, did something come up?" Suzie asked.

"Why don't you meet me there and I'll fill you in," Jason said as he hurried towards his patrol car.

"He seems in a hurry," Mary said.

"Must be important," Suzie replied with intrigue as they got

back in the car.

“Sounds it,” Mary said as she started the car and pulled onto the street. “Why do you think he wants us to meet him there?”

“I'm not sure,” Suzie frowned. “But I'd imagine that he just got confirmation that this was no accident after all and he wants to fill us in.”

As they were driving towards the medical examiner's office, Suzie caught sight of someone walking along the side of the road. She couldn't quite place who the person was, which was unusual as she had gotten to know most of the people in town. She narrowed her eyes as she studied the man in the low brimmed hat. He was walking with purpose as if he had a place to be rather than being out for a casual stroll. His clothes looked too expensive for someone to be just out for a walk.

“Slow down a little,” Suzie instructed Mary quietly.

Mary glanced out the side window at the man Suzie was watching. She slowed down as Suzie had instructed her. As they slowed beside the man, he suddenly turned down one of the neighborhood streets.

“Do you want me to follow him?” Mary asked. “He does look very suspicious.”

“No, we better not,” Suzie said and frowned. “Jason's waiting for us. I don't want someone making a complaint against us for following them for no reason, either,” she added.

“He does seem out of place,” Mary said as she continued to drive towards the medical examiner's office. “Did you get a good look at him?”

“I couldn't see his face,” Suzie sighed. When they reached the parking lot of the office, Suzie saw Jason's patrol car parked out front. She and Mary walked up to the front door and stepped inside. There was no one in the front office area.

“Hello?” Suzie called out. She knew better than to slip past the double doors without permission. It was a medical examiner’s office and she was a bit worried about the possibilities of what she might find.

“Suzie?” Jason called back and then pushed through the double doors. “Come on back,” he said with a grave expression. Suzie held the door open for Mary. They were greeted by the sharp scent of disinfectant and the chemicals used for preservation. Soft music was playing, something classical with lots of violins. Summer was in a

gown with clear goggles over her eyes and gloves that seemed to go up to her elbows. Sprawled out on the table was Antony, looking much better than he did when they first found him, but still quite dead.

“Stay there,” Summer warned sharply. “I don't want anything to contaminate the evidence.”

“What's happened?” Suzie asked. “Did he at least die quickly from the accident?” she asked hopefully. She hated to think of anyone suffering.

“Yes, he did suffer some injuries from the accident,” Summer explained as she swept her gaze over the report in her hand. “But that isn't what killed him.”

“That's what I don't understand,” Jason said. “He looked pretty beat up from the crash.”

“He was, but he did survive the crash,” Summer explained. “At least for a little while. I can't predict exactly the amount of time between the crash-inflicted injuries and his death. But I can say with confidence that the bruising around his nose and mouth was caused by forceful suffocation. He probably was too injured to defend himself against the killer. The suffocation is what actually killed him. This wasn't just a car accident, this was a homicide,” she closed the folder and handed it over to Jason. “Sorry to increase your workload.”

“Great,” Jason said as he ran his hand back through his red hair. “This is going to turn into a big mess. We've got a murder, plus a missing person.”

“Were the injuries that he suffered from the accident life threatening?” Suzie asked with a frown.

“I think so,” Summer nodded. “I believe that without medical attention he would have succumbed to his injuries in a short period of time. Obviously that can't be said with absolute certainty, but it is my best estimation.”

“Maybe someone thought they were committing an act of mercy?” Mary suggested as she gazed at Antony's remains. “Perhaps they came across him as injured as he was and decided to end his life.”

“I doubt it,” Jason said with disbelief.

“It just doesn't make sense to me that after an accident like that a murderer would go to all the trouble of suffocating an already dying man. Why risk murder charges when they could have just

waited it out?" Suzie asked.

"Maybe they were concerned that he wouldn't die fast enough," Jason sighed. "If someone went to all this trouble it was very likely that they wanted to keep him quiet about something. Whoever ran his car off the road probably didn't want to risk the possibility of Antony being revived and being able to talk."

"So, Antony likely knew something," Suzie said softly. "Something that he shouldn't have known."

"Something important enough to kill over," Jason added grimly.

"All I know for sure is that he died sometime between two and five in the morning," Summer explained. "I'm still waiting for the toxicology reports but I didn't find any evidence to suggest that he was under the influence of anything at the time of the accident."

"Okay," Jason nodded and tucked his hands deep into his pockets. "Thanks for your help, Dr. Rose," he said in a professional tone, though his gaze lingered on hers in a less than professional manner.

"Anything I can do to help," she replied warmly. Mary and Suzie exchanged a knowing glance before they walked out of the exam room.

"Wait up you two," Jason called out as he walked after them. Suzie felt a little uneasy. She wondered if Jason had discovered that they were holding back some information. "The reason I asked you to come here when I found out this wasn't an accident was so you would be informed and know that you need to be very cautious, please. Lock the doors and windows at Dune House and stay safe."

"Okay," Mary said and Suzie nodded in agreement.

"Also, with this being a homicide investigation now it's even more important that we locate Daria. If you hear from her, or come across anyone who has seen her, I want you to tell me right away," he looked between Suzie and Mary. "I really hope that she turns up alive and well. I don't want this turning into a double homicide."

"We'll let you know if we hear or see anything," Suzie assured him and shot a furtive glance in Mary's direction.

"I'm going to check in at the station and see if there were any tips or reports of an accident last night," Jason said. "Sometimes people wait until the next day to report hearing strange noises."

"Can't they get more people out here to help find her?" Mary asked with obvious frustration. "That poor woman could be hurt or being held somewhere."

“Unfortunately, I don’t think I’ll get more resources. But, I will try,” he assured them both. “Daria might just be the key to understanding what happened to Antony.”

“Let's hope we find her quickly,” Suzie said. Jason nodded and headed out to his patrol car. As Suzie and Mary stepped outside, Suzie spoke softly. “You know it is possible that Daria really did just take off. She might not have anything to do with any of this,” she sighed.

“Honestly, I hope that is the case,” Mary said grimly. “Because if she was involved, she's either another victim, or a potential murderer.”

“I think we need to take another look at the crime scene,” Suzie said thoughtfully. “If we can find a way to prove that Daria was in that car or near it at the time of the accident then maybe Jason can get some more help in searching for her.” Mary nodded as they walked over to their car.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

On the drive back to the country road they had been on that morning, a tension began to build between the two friends. Suzie could sense it as Mary was driving. Mary normally would turn on the radio, or chat about the weather, anything to keep a friendly, comfortable conversation going. If they weren't talking about anything the atmosphere still felt relaxed. But this time Suzie could feel the tension as Mary was perfectly silent, clasping the steering wheel firmly and staring hard through the windshield. Suzie shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"What is it, Mary?" she asked with a frown.

"Hmm?" Mary glanced over at her.

"I know something is on your mind, spill it," Suzie insisted. Mary eased the car down the country road. She slowed her speed to make sure that they wouldn't get stuck in the sandy dirt.

"You know me too well," Mary shot Suzie a half-smile.

"So, tell me," Suzie insisted as she studied Mary.

"All right," Mary sighed as she parked the car several yards away from the area where the accident had happened. A large space was now isolated by yellow police tape. "I'm a little concerned about what we're keeping from Jason," she admitted.

"Oh," Suzie nodded slowly. "I understand what you mean. I guess we are treading on dangerous ground by not sharing everything with him."

"It's not just that," Mary insisted as she looked over at Suzie. "He's your cousin, Suzie, don't you think we can trust him? Don't you think he would take your concerns about keeping Daria safe seriously?"

"I do trust Jason," Suzie stated firmly, and then sighed. "Mary, I worked for so many years as an investigative reporter. The problem

I always faced when it came to the police was no matter how honest they were, no matter how eager to help, once a crime had been reported they no longer had control over it. They have to follow protocol or risk losing their job, and possibly even facing legal trouble themselves. I trust Jason, but I also know that he will follow orders. Daria isn't a killer, I know it. I feel it in my bones. But if I tell Jason about the argument I overheard, he's going to see things very differently."

"Maybe you should give him a little more credit," Mary suggested. "He might surprise you."

"Maybe," Suzie shook her head. "But I'm not going to put Daria at risk on a whim. It's not like I'm concealing evidence, it's something I heard. I might have heard wrong, after all."

"You know you didn't hear wrong," Mary said as she met Suzie's eyes. "You have a mind like a steel trap. I'm sure you remember the conversation word for word."

"I do," Suzie whispered softly. "That's just it. I remember the way Daria's voice shook, not with anger but with fear. She wasn't trying to scare Antony, she was terrified of what would happen to her family. I believe she was terrified of whoever ultimately killed Antony."

"Well, hopefully whoever it is has already left Garber," Mary said with a frown. "I really do not want to deal with a murderer."

"Me neither," Suzie agreed. "But I won't rest until we figure out where Daria is."

As they stepped out of the car the temperature had dropped by several degrees. Suzie shivered a little and wrapped her arms around herself.

"Should have worn a jacket," she muttered to herself.

"It looks like they've already taken the car," Mary said as she tilted her head towards the area of the road where the car had been. "I'm not sure what we'll find here that Jason and Kirk could have overlooked," Mary said as she stood beside the tall grass. "Kirk seems to be quite good at searching for things."

"Maybe so," Suzie said as she brushed the tall grass back. "But at the time we didn't know that this was potentially a murder investigation, or even that Daria was definitely missing. So, maybe he just didn't notice something that now will seem out of place."

"Maybe," Mary agreed. She began combing through the tall grass as well.

“You know, maybe we need to think this through a little more,” Mary suddenly said.

“What do you mean?” Suzie asked.

“We considered that Daria had been standing in the middle of the road, causing the car to swerve. We considered that she might have been thrown from the car when it crashed, but what if she just got out and walked away?” she glanced over the trees that lined the road. “What if it was her intention to disappear?”

“Then she would have hidden her trail,” Suzie said with a snap of her fingers. “We need to look deeper into the woods. At some point she would have felt as if she was far enough from the accident scene not to be detected.”

“Exactly,” Mary agreed. They began walking through the trees, deeper into the woods. The trees were fairly widespread. In daylight they didn't provide a lot of cover. But in the dark they would have kept Daria hidden.

“Here,” Suzie called out with excitement. “Look at this,” she said and pointed to a branch that was half-torn from the trunk of a tree.

“It looks like someone was hanging onto it,” Mary said. She peered down at the ground. “Here look, there's a high, thick root and the dirt is disturbed. She probably lost her footing and grabbed onto the branch to steady herself.”

“This would be from her sweater then,” Suzie said as she pointed to a tuft of pink material that was clinging to the bark of the tree.

“That is evidence, don't touch,” Mary warned. “Suzie, I really think it's time we clued Jason in to what we suspect.”

“All right,” Suzie nodded reluctantly.

“I think it was time for that quite some time ago,” Kirk said from behind them. Suzie nearly jumped out of her skin at the sudden sound of the voice, one she still wasn't entirely familiar with. She spun around swiftly to face him.

“Kirk, what are you doing here?” Mary asked breathlessly, as she too had been startled.

“I'm the police officer, and you're asking me what I'm doing at the crime scene?” he asked as he narrowed his eyes and looked between the two of them. “I think I'd be better off asking the two of you that. Just what have you two been holding back about this case?”

“I think we'd rather speak with Jason about it,” Suzie said

nervously. Kirk seemed like a decent man, but she didn't want Jason to get annoyed about them keeping the information from him but telling Kirk.

"I think you should tell me, here and now, because until you do nobody is going anywhere. So, tell me," Kirk said and folded his arms across his chest. "Everything," he added and furrowed one brow. Jason had a boyish nature but Kirk had a naturally more forceful presence although they could both be very authoritative when they chose. Kirk seemed to be choosing to exercise his authority as he studied the two women.

"There's not much to tell," Suzie stammered out. "We just overheard a few spats between Antony and Daria. We suspected that maybe Daria had something to do with the accident and had walked away from it unscathed so we wanted to see if we could find something to prove that, which led us out here to this tree, and this tuft of material," she added as she pointed to the material on the tree bark.

"Why is it that you didn't tell us about the fights from the beginning?" he said with clear frustration. "That could have entirely changed the focus of the investigation."

"I didn't want Daria to get into trouble," Suzie admitted, realizing how foolish that sounded only after she said it.

"And?" he narrowed his eyes and looked from Suzie to Mary. "What else aren't you telling me?"

"Suzie thought that maybe the Gables were being followed," Mary spurted out.

"Mary," Suzie shot her a look of impatience.

"You think they were being followed?" Kirk asked, his expression becoming even more serious. "Why?"

"It seemed like someone might have been in their room, hiding in the closet," Suzie admitted quietly. "And, the note they left, the handwriting did not seem to match Daria's even though the note was signed by her. It was just odd. When I first noticed it we didn't know everything that we do now."

Kirk swept a hand back through his hair and looked away from the two before fixing them with a steady glare.

"Is there anything else?" he asked.

"Tell him about what you heard Daria say to Antony in the latest argument," Mary said as Suzie scowled at her.

"I think I heard Daria threaten to kill Antony in the argument I

overheard," Suzie admitted. "But I can't be sure what was said and people say lots of things in the heat of the moment."

"I don't know what drove you to keep all of this information hidden. But you should both know that you have probably set this investigation back by keeping these details to yourself. Is there anything else I should know?" he demanded roughly.

"Nothing," Suzie shook her head and shifted closer to Mary.

"Clear the area," Kirk said darkly. "We're going to need to get a crime scene team in here to evaluate this evidence."

"We're sorry, Kirk," Mary said feebly. Kirk only shook his head and began barking into his radio. As Suzie and Mary walked away from the scene, Mary was beside herself with concern.

"Do you think that Jason is going to be upset?" she asked. "I knew we should have told them sooner."

"Mary, it all comes down to finding Daria, right?" Suzie asked as she settled into the car.

"Yes," Mary nodded and started the car.

"Then I say we find her," Suzie said calmly. "Maybe Jason and Kirk will be able to find her first, but it can never hurt to have more people looking for her. Now they have evidence that she was at the crime scene and more than likely alive there, they should be able to get more resources."

"Jason is going to be livid," Mary sighed as she drove down the old country road.

"Jason will get over it," Suzie insisted. As if sensing he was being spoken of Jason's number flashed on Suzie's cell phone. Suzie stared at it for a moment. She didn't know if she should answer it.

"Pick it up," Mary said reluctantly. "We're going to have to fess up eventually."

"All right," Suzie sighed and answered the phone. "Jason, I can explain," she began to say.

"Suzie, I don't know where you and Mary are but I need you at Dune House. The crime scene team is waiting there to get into the Gables' room. How fast can you get there?" he asked.

"In about two minutes," Suzie replied nervously.

"Good, thanks Suzie, I appreciate it," Jason said before hanging up the phone.

Suzie felt her heart sink. His warmth made her feel even worse.

"I don't think he knows yet," Suzie said with a frown. "We need to get back to Dune House, there's a crime scene team waiting."

Mary nodded and sped up.

When Suzie and Mary pulled into the parking lot of Dune House there was a police car and a crime scene van. An officer that Suzie didn't recognize as well as two crime scene technicians were waiting on the porch.

“What a beautiful old place,” one of the technicians said as Suzie and Mary approached him.

“Thank you,” Suzie said politely. She unlocked the door and led the officer and technicians to the room where the Gables had been staying.

“It's right here,” she said as she pushed the door open.

“Has anyone besides you and Mary been inside?” the technician asked.

“I don’t think so,” Suzie replied. “We haven't had any other guests, and Mary and I do all of the cleaning, so there is no other staff to consider.”

“Cleaning?” the technician asked. “Have you cleaned it since they were in here?”

“Yes,” Suzie admitted. “Before we knew anything was wrong the room was cleaned.”

“Then there probably won't be much for us to find.”

“There's this,” Mary said as she appeared beside Suzie. She held out the passport that they had found left behind in the Gables' room.

“Good,” the technician nodded as he took the passport from her and bagged it. “We might be able to find some fingerprints on there.”

“Also, you might want to check the outside of the window,” Suzie said. “And the inside of the closet door. I thought perhaps someone had come in through the window, and might have been

hiding in the closet."

"That must have been frightening for you," the technician said with a frown. "Thanks for the information. We'll make sure we check those areas very thoroughly."

Suzie and Mary walked back down the hallway to the front desk.

"I hope you didn't mind that I gave him the passport," Mary said. "I thought that they might be able to find something in it."

"Anything that can help find Daria," Suzie said. "I'm sorry I didn't tell Jason about someone coming through the window and hiding in the closet but I thought I was just imagining it," Suzie insisted with a frown. "You know how it is, once an investigative reporter, always an investigative reporter. I thought I was seeing more than what was actually there."

"Maybe you'll trust your instincts from now on," Mary suggested.

"Funny you should say that," Suzie said. "My instincts are telling me to find out what I can about Antony and Daria. I want to go over to Parish and see if I can find out what they might have been involved in."

"Don't you think that Jason is already making sure that's happening?" Mary questioned.

"Maybe he is," Suzie admitted. "But people are often less likely to talk to police. I just think if I get a feel for what their lives were like in Parish, I might be able to figure out where Daria could be."

"Well, I did tell you to start trusting your instincts," Mary said grimly. "Just be careful."

"I'm going to be," Suzie promised her. "I looked up Antony's business address so I'm going to go to his office and see if there's anyone there. Maybe drive around the neighborhood a little."

"Keep your cell phone on," Mary commanded sharply.

"I will," Suzie smiled. "Don't worry, I'll be back before you know it."

"I'll let you know if anything comes up from the crime scene investigation," Mary said.

"Thanks," Suzie nodded and then headed for the door.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

Before setting out on her journey into Parish, Suzie sent a text to Paul. She knew she might not hear back from him, but it made her feel connected to him just to send him a quick message.

Things are a little crazy in Garber, hope it is much calmer out on the water.

As she started her car she thought about the information that she hadn't given to Jason. She knew that he wasn't going to be pleased with her for withholding it. She only hoped that she would find something good to give him to help offset his frustration. She rather doubted he would be easily appeased.

Suzie typed Antony's business address into her phone and let the GPS lead her in the direction she needed to go. Even though the towns were side by side the people who resided in them acted as if they were on opposite ends of the world. Garber was considered the touristy town, while Parish was thought of as the tougher, higher crime area. Whether either was true Suzie couldn't really say, but she knew that people from the two towns rarely mixed. Suzie was hoping that locating his business might give her a better idea of what had happened to them. Perhaps a receptionist could fill her in on some pesky clients that were harassing him.

When she pulled up to the building, Suzie stared at it for some time. Though it was obviously an office building which meant that Antony's office was likely locked up tight, Suzie hoped that she would still be able to find out some solid information about Antony and what might have put him in the sights of a killer.

As Suzie parked the car she noticed a few people standing at the corner of the block. They appeared to be having a casual

conversation, but Suzie felt a tingle along the back of her neck. When she had worked as an investigative reporter she had learned to always trust her instincts. Though something might seem perfectly normal on the surface, if she felt strangely about it, she always used extra caution. She stared at them through the windshield, waiting to see if they would disperse. After a few minutes she grew even more suspicious. No one spent that much time standing on a corner talking. They might have walked together lost in discussion. They might have waited until the road was clear to cross. But there was nothing important enough to keep them in that exact spot for so long.

Suzie narrowed her eyes. She pulled out her cell phone, which had a camera. As she raised it to snap a picture of the gathering, one of the men cast a long glance in her direction. Suzie snapped the picture, but she felt a chill race along her spine. The man's eyes bore right through her windshield. She put the phone to her ear in an attempt to appear as if she was talking on it. The man turned away. A moment later he nodded to the others, then turned and walked along the sidewalk and around the block.

Suzie's heart was racing. As the other men went their separate ways Suzie had a moment of doubt. Had she seen more than what was really there? Sometimes her imagination found mystery, when there was really only normal activity. With a sigh she opened her car door and began to walk towards the building that housed the office she was looking for. As she walked, she felt the tingling on the back of her neck again. She closed her eyes briefly to calm herself, and then glanced over her shoulder. There was no one behind her. As she turned back towards the office building, she nearly walked directly into the man whose photograph she had taken.

“Excuse me,” he said quickly and took a step back from her. Suzie was too shocked to even speak. She stared at him, wondering if he intended to hurt her. “I got a little turned around,” he explained in halting English. “Can you tell me where the art museum is?”

Suzie felt her heart pound again. She had been waiting for him to pull a gun, or threaten her in some way. But the reality was he was looking for directions. He had probably asked the people on the corner for directions as well. Obviously, he hadn't understood them very well. Still, she thought his accent was a little forced. Could he

be faking it?

“It's just around the corner and one block north,” Suzie said. She still felt a little numb from the fear she had experienced. She truly had no idea where the art museum was or even whether there was an art museum in Parish, but she wanted him to go away. She hoped that by giving him the wrong directions he would be gone long enough for her to disappear. He studied her intently as if he might say something more. Suzie clutched her cell phone tightly and stared back at him.

“Thank you,” he finally said and nodded. He walked past Suzie. Suzie had to force herself not to look over her shoulder to make sure that he turned down the street. She didn't want to give him any reason to try to speak to her again. Instead she walked towards the office building. As she stepped onto the sidewalk that ran the length of the front of the building, she tossed a quick look over her shoulder. There was no sign of the man anywhere. With a sigh of relief she headed for the office that belonged to Antony. As she had expected it was closed. The door was locked. There was a large front window. Suzie cupped her hands and looked through the window, but there was not much to see. There was a front desk, a few comfortable chairs in the waiting area, and some financial magazines scattered around. Nothing incriminating. Nothing revealing. With a sigh she lowered her hands.

She was considering breaking in, when she heard the sharp sound of something being dragged along the sidewalk. She looked to her right to see a woman in a very colorful dress sweeping the sidewalk in front of the adjacent office. Suzie was a little surprised by her appearance, as she wasn't exactly dressed like a business woman. Her hair was milky blonde and piled up on the top of her head with frizzy curls. She wore far too much make-up, and her drooping cheeks revealed that she must have been in her senior years. But when she smiled at Suzie, Suzie instantly liked her.

“Hello there,” Suzie said as the woman continued to sweep the sidewalk.

“I'm sorry if I'm disturbing you,” the woman replied.

“Not at all,” Suzie said with a slight shake of her head.

Suzie couldn't quite place what she liked about the woman, but she felt comfortable enough to ask her a few questions. “I was hoping to find Antony Gable,” she explained. “He operates out of this office.”

“Oh sure, I know Antony,” the woman nodded with a sheepish smile.

“Do you know what type of business Antony was in?” Suzie asked as she studied the woman intently. The woman picked up a bright yellow watering can and began watering a few potted plants that were lined up in front of the office window. Suzie noticed that the lettering on the window declared her a massage therapist specializing in energy therapies. Suzie arched an eyebrow at that, and then looked back at the woman.

“Oh sure, it's accounting I believe. Well,” she sighed for a moment and cast an uncomfortable look in Suzie's direction. “I'm not exactly sure, but I know it had to do with numbers and money. Some of the characters that would come and go were a little bit on the seedy side,” she confided.

“What made them seedy?” Suzie asked as the woman set down her watering can.

“Oh, you know, slicked back hair, dark suits, dangling cigarettes, just a rough element,” she shrugged and plucked a leaf from one of her plants. “They never really caused any trouble so I did my best to mind my own business. But, I could feel how dark they were,” she added in an ominous tone. “I am sure there were many dodgy dealings going on in that office.”

Suzie looked at her quizzically. There was one thing she knew for certain. This woman was not in the habit of minding her own business. “Did you happen to catch any of his clients' names?”

Instantly the woman tensed up. She lifted her eyes to Suzie's. Suzie was startled to see genuine fear in her eyes. This wasn't a show she was putting on, or exaggeration for the sake of drama, this was actual fear. A woman with such a sunny disposition wouldn't be so quick to be afraid, Suzie thought.

“No, I don't think so,” she mumbled.

Suzie rested a hand lightly on the curve of the woman's shoulder and looked into her eyes. “It's okay, you can tell me. I'm only trying to help, I'm not trying to cause you any trouble.”

“I just don't want anyone getting the wrong idea,” the woman explained. “I'm not saying they're criminals. I wouldn't know. I don't know anything about their business.”

“But you know their names,” Suzie pressed and took a slight step closer to her.

“One name,” she admitted and then lowered her voice to an

almost imperceptible whisper. “Dominic Palov. I saw him go in a few times, and sometimes a few of his men.”

“Is that someone you know?” Suzie asked with growing concern. It was clear that it was really irritating this woman to be talking about it.

“It's someone that everyone in the town of Parish knows,” the woman replied, still in a whisper. “He's a little intimidating, which is why I'd prefer it if he never knew I spoke to you.”

Suzie nodded. She guessed if the police from Garber had questioned this woman, she would not have volunteered this information.

“That's not a problem at all,” Suzie assured her. “This is just between you and me. Has anyone been hanging around Antony's office since he's been gone?”

“Not that I've seen,” she shook her head. “I keep pretty good track of who comes and goes, you know just for safety reasons,” she added. “But no one's been near his office that I've seen. He was all set to go on a fabulous vacation. He even stopped in to tell me about it. Antony could be a nice man, when he wanted to be. He was always offering to send me some clients for my massage business. But I prefer a different kind of clientele,” she explained nervously.

“Thank you,” Suzie said and smiled at the woman. “You've helped me out a lot.”

“I heard about Antony you know,” she said in a whisper. “Rumors fly around here fast. Such a shame that he would die so young. Well, people can say what they want about Antony, but he was always nice to me,” she sighed. “He even watered my plants when I was away. He was a good boy.”

“I'm sorry for your loss,” Suzie said softly. “If you happen to see his wife, Daria, could you please contact me?” She handed the woman a business card for Dune House.

“Oh, I doubt I’ll see Daria,” she shook her head. “I only know of her because she's met Antony here a few times, and he's mentioned her. She hated coming to the office especially when her father's clients were around.”

“Her father's?” Suzie asked, her eyes widening slightly.

“Oops, yes,” she frowned. “You didn't hear it from me, but her father is Dominic Palov. I can tell you, if something unseemly happened to Antony, he's the first place you should look.”

“Thank you,” Suzie said again. “Beautiful flowers,” she added before she turned and walked away. As she was walking back to her car, her cell phone began to ring. Suzie braced herself, expecting that it might be Jason. Instead it was Mary. She answered it quickly.

“Hello?”

“The crime scene technicians are done,” Mary told her. “Did you have any luck in Parish?”

“Some,” Suzie said. “I have a name we can start with. I think we're going to need to go to the library and get Louis' help.”

“I could use a walk, I'll meet you there,” Mary offered.

“Mary, be careful,” Suzie warned her. “I think we may be dealing with people that are more dangerous than we first thought.”

Suzie hung up her phone and headed to the library in Garber.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

As Suzie drove she thought about what the woman outside Antony’s office had said about Daria's father. If he had such a terrible reputation, then he would certainly be a prime suspect in Antony's murder.

When Suzie reached the library she knew that it would be a few more minutes before Mary joined her so she decided to bite the bullet and call Jason. She was hoping that if she told him the truth before he had the chance to find out for himself, he wouldn't be as angry. She dialed his number. It rang a few times. Then it went to voicemail. Suzie frowned. She decided to try again. She dialed his number, put the phone to her ear, and listened to it ring. Just when she was expecting his voicemail to pick up she heard a rapping on her window. She jumped, nearly dropping the phone. She turned quickly to see Mary peering at her through the window. Blushing, she hung up the phone and tucked it into her purse. She stepped out of her car.

“Sorry if I startled you,” Mary said.

“It's okay, my mind was just somewhere else,” Suzie replied.

“So, what did you find out?” Mary asked with interest.

“Daria's father is a very well-known man in Parish, a suspected criminal,” Suzie explained. “Maybe Louis can help us learn more about him, since he seems to know everything about everyone around here.”

“Let's find out,” Mary agreed.

When Suzie and Mary stepped into the library Louis looked up at them. He didn't smile, but he nodded. Louis was more nosy than friendly but he took his job very seriously and he was always very helpful.

“Ladies,” he said as he swiveled on his stool to face them. “How

can I help you today?"

"Louis, what can you tell me about the Palov family?" Suzie asked as she leaned on his desk.

"Ah, the Palov's," Louis smirked faintly. "They are the closest thing that Parish has to criminal royalty. They have been participating in schemes and money laundering for generations."

"Including Dominic Palov?" Suzie asked with interest.

"Absolutely, in fact he revived the family business and made no secret of intending to pass it down to his only child, his daughter Daria," he frowned. "Not exactly the inheritance that most people would want, but according to the Palovs this is the way that things are done in their family."

"I find it hard to believe that the Parish police department just turns a blind eye to all of this," Mary said with dismay.

"Actually, they don't," Louis said. He tapped something on his keyboard and then turned the flat screen monitor to face Suzie and Mary. A newspaper article was displayed on the screen. "They've tried to pin something on Dominic Palov for years, but he always manages to come out clean. They know what they're doing, and hire the best lawyers. Wait a minute," Louis' eyes widened. "The woman who was staying at Dune House, Daria Gable, was she Dominic Palov's daughter?" he asked.

"I believe so," Suzie replied grimly.

"Wow," Louis shook his head. "That should shake Garber up a bit."

"But Antony wanted out," Suzie said in a whisper. "I think that's what I heard them arguing about. He was trying to get Daria to agree with him."

"That certainly would have been a very dangerous thing for him to want," Louis shook his head. "Dominic Palov was the first of his family to branch off as well. He made his childhood friend a business partner. Prior to that, only family was allowed to participate in the business. But I doubt that Dominic would ever stand for Daria leaving the business."

"Who is Dominic's partner?" Suzie asked.

"Well, it's hard to say if they're even still partners. It depends on what day it is. Bob Baylor is his partner's name. They don't really see eye to eye," Louis confided. "There are more reports of the two of them going at it in public than there are of their illegal activities. Dominic and Baylor are always at odds," he grimaced as he typed

something into his computer. “Here, look at this,” he said as he pointed to a new article that came up on the screen about the men having a brawl outside a restaurant. “There are quite a few articles like this and I'm guessing that their feud might have something to do with how Antony ended up dead.”

“What about Antony?” Suzie asked. “How did he get involved? Does he have a criminal background, too?”

“He fell in love,” Louis replied matter-of-factly. “Antony wasn't even from Parish. He grew up in some southern state. But he came here for college. He was getting his degree when he first met Daria, and that was that. It sent a ripple through Parish when their engagement was announced in the newspaper. It is very unusual for a Palov to marry an outsider. It was a big scandal.”

“How romantic,” Mary said wistfully. “They went against the odds.”

“And you see where that got Antony?” Louis pushed his glasses up along his nose. “No, it's pretty clear that this was not an approved match. Of course, it was well known that Daria had her father wrapped around her finger. Her mother died when she was young, she's Dominic's only child.”

“Now, her husband is dead, and she is missing,” Suzie said thoughtfully. “There's no doubt in my mind that Dominic was involved in some way. Do you have any information on how I could find him?” she asked hopefully.

Louis froze. He stared hard at her. Mary reached into her purse and pulled out her phone. She fiddled with the keyboard as Louis spoke.

“Suzie, this is not someone you want to know. Dominic Palov is a highly dangerous man. No one finds him. He finds you,” he narrowed his eyes slightly. “Steer clear of him, trust me.”

“I think I can handle one small town criminal,” Suzie replied with disdain. “How dangerous could he be?”

“Just trust me on this one,” Louis pleaded as he met her eyes. “He's not a good guy to know.”

“All right,” Suzie assented, though it was clear to Mary that she was only doing so for Louis' sake. Suzie knew that Louis wasn't going to give her any more information, such as an address or phone number even if he had it.

“I guess we need to see if we can find a way to talk to Dominic,” Suzie sighed as she and Mary walked out of the library.

“Already found a way,” Mary said in a gleeful tone. She held up her phone. “I saw the name of the restaurant where they were arguing in the article Louis showed us. I found the address and the phone number. It said they were regulars there. So, if it’s one of Dominic's regular haunts, I'm sure we can find our way to him from there.”

“Wow, Mary,” Suzie said with pride. “That was pretty smooth.”

“I've learned a thing or two about finding out important information,” Mary said with a chuckle. “Teenagers will do that to you.”

“Well, I'm hungry, how about you?” Suzie asked with a sheepish smile.

“I could eat,” Mary agreed as they headed for the car.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

As Suzie and Mary drove back to Parish, Suzie tried to call Jason again. Once more his phone was sent to voicemail after a few rings. She was getting the feeling that he was blowing her off, which meant he had probably already talked to Kirk about what she and Mary had revealed. Or maybe, he was just busy. Either way, she wasn't getting through. She hung up and tucked her phone into her purse.

“Are you all right?” Mary asked as she glanced over at her.

“I will be, once we find Daria,” Suzie said.

Mary parked in the parking lot of the restaurant. As Suzie walked across the parking lot she glanced around for any sign of the man she had encountered at Antony's office building. She didn't notice anyone lurking.

“The main street in Parish isn’t that much different from Garber,” Mary chuckled as she opened the door of the restaurant.

“Don't say that too loud,” Suzie warned her. “You'll rile the locals.”

The restaurant was nearly empty. It was about an hour after the normal lunch rush. The décor was expensive but modest. It was just enough to make her think that the meal they served might cost a bit more than they liked to spend. Suzie frowned as they settled at their table and she glanced around the empty restaurant once more.

“I don't think there's much chance of finding him here,” she said with a sigh.

“Don't lose hope,” Mary encouraged her. “I'm sure that we'll figure something out.”

When the waitress walked over, Suzie glanced up at her with a critical eye. She didn't look like most waitresses. She was wearing a skin-tight, lacy, black mini-skirt with a matching shirt. Her heels

were much too high for a server, and her make-up appeared as if it had just been applied rather than being caked on to survive a full shift.

“What can I get you, ladies?” she asked with a thick Italian accent.

“We're hoping that you could tell us where we could find Dominic Palov,” Suzie said swiftly. She watched as the woman grimaced. “We were told that he is often here.”

“I'm sorry, we're a restaurant, maybe you are mistaken about what we do here,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Mary raised an eyebrow and then looked over at Suzie. When she turned back to the waitress she turned on her overly polite charm. “We're not mistaken, we would like some lunch. But we would also like a little friendly information,” she explained.

“The lunch you're welcome to,” the woman said sternly as she dropped menus on the table before them. “But the information, is not on the menu,” her eyes were hard as she surveyed the two of them.

As she stalked away Suzie shook her head. “I guess he's not as popular at this place as we thought he was,” she said. “It was worth a try.”

“At least we can eat,” Mary suggested.

“True,” Suzie agreed and began perusing the menu. When Suzie looked up from her menu again, a different waitress approached them. This waitress was dressed much more sensibly, with her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail.

“Can I take your order?”

“Anything you would recommend?” Mary asked politely.

“Anything that isn't going to drain my wallet?” Suzie muttered and handed the waitress her menu. “I'll just take a cup of soup.”

“Ditto,” Mary nodded and handed the waitress her menu as well. The waitress rolled her eyes slightly and nodded.

“It'll be right up,” she said as she walked away. Suzie settled back in her chair and sighed.

“I keep thinking about Daria,” she confessed. “I hope she's somewhere safe. Maybe Jason will find her.”

“I hope so,” Mary nodded. “The sooner the better. I wonder if she’s tried to contact anyone.”

“The last time I talked to Jason he said her credit cards haven't been used,” Suzie shook her head with dismay. “We know she's not

answering her cell phone at all and Jason hasn't had any luck locating it."

"It is all very strange and it doesn't bode well for her safety," Mary mumbled. The waitress brought the two cups of soup along with a full basket of bread. She walked away for a moment and then returned with a plate, silverware, and a wine glass, which she arranged between Mary and Suzie. Suzie looked up at her with confusion.

"What's this for?" she asked.

The waitress didn't speak or even look at her. She walked away for a moment and then returned to fill the wine glass.

"Excuse me," Mary said more firmly. "We didn't order any wine."

The waitress glanced up briefly, looked at both of them, and then walked away.

"Strange," Suzie said and shook her head. "Let's finish up and get out of here."

"Agreed," Mary said and began to spoon her soup more swiftly into her mouth.

When the chair between them was abruptly pulled out, both Suzie and Mary looked up with surprise. The man that sat down before them was dressed in a fine suit. His dark hair was perfectly combed. He had a small black mustache that was also perfectly combed. His eyes were as dark as midnight and as hard as granite. He looked directly at Suzie.

"I heard that you were looking for me," the man said so evenly that it was impossible to detect any emotion in his voice. His dark eyes lingered on Suzie's. "My name is Dominic Palov," he added. "I'm not sure what type of loan you need, but I'm sure I can provide it." Suzie's heart raced at the mention of his name. Of course she had hoped to make contact with him at the restaurant, but she hadn't expected him to suddenly appear at their table. She watched as he casually picked up his glass of wine and took a sip.

"I'm not here for a loan, Dominic," Suzie replied, holding his gaze steadily in return. "I'm here to talk about your daughter."

"My daughter?" Dominic asked. His voice abruptly changed from smooth as silk to slightly panicked. "What about her?"

"Her husband was found dead," Suzie explained. "She seems to be missing. Have you seen her?"

"Are you some kind of police officer or something?" he asked

with some confusion. “You don't look like a police officer.”

“I'm something,” she replied seriously. “I just want to know if you've spoken with Daria.”

“I haven't,” he answered. “My daughter and I were having some difficulties understanding each other. I haven't talked to her in some time.” His eyes danced back and forth between Suzie and Mary.

“Was it about Antony?” Suzie suggested as she slid back in her chair just slightly.

“You seem to know an awful lot about me,” Dominic said as he swirled his wine in his glass. “Yet, I know nothing about either of you. Not even your names.”

“I'm Mary,” Mary supplied swiftly. “This is Suzie. We just want to help Daria.”

“Why do you have such interest in my daughter?” he asked, his eyes still settled on Suzie.

“We had the chance to meet her. She was quite kind. With her husband dead, we want to make sure that she is safe. Don't you want the same thing?” she asked him.

“Of course I do,” he said darkly. “Daria is an independent woman, but she never really understood the dangers that life could pose.”

“I'm hoping she's somewhere safe,” Suzie explained. “We're not looking to get her into any kind of trouble. We just want to know that she is safe.”

“That's thoughtful of you,” Dominic said quietly. His jaw trembled. He clenched his teeth tighter. He abruptly finished his glass of wine. “Wherever my daughter is, I'm sure she is just fine,” he said casually. Then he stood up from the table. “Your meal is on the house,” he added. “Any friend of Daria's is a friend of mine.”

As he walked away from the table Mary leaned close to Suzie.

“I'm not sure if I want to be his friend,” she whispered to her.

“It has to be better than being his enemy,” Suzie whispered back.

“Do you believe him?” Mary asked.

“I'm not sure,” Suzie replied. “But I don't think we're going to get any more information out of him.”

Mary frowned then finished her soup.

As they left the restaurant, Suzie was reaching into her purse for her cell phone yet again, to see if she might have missed a call from Jason.

As she was rummaging in her purse, she didn't notice someone walking behind her. Mary didn't either. It wasn't until they were both suddenly shoved from behind that either of them realized they were being followed.

“Hey!” Suzie shouted as she stumbled around the side of the restaurant. Mary nearly lost her balance and grabbed onto the exterior wall of the restaurant to steady herself. Suzie turned around and looked up to see Dominic standing just behind them, blocking their way to the front of the restaurant. He had them isolated behind the restaurant, and no one was going to notice them being there. Of course no one knew that they had gone to lunch in Parish either, so no one would be looking for them. He looked more dangerous than ever. His eyes were wild as they jumped back and forth between Suzie and Mary.

“I needed to speak with you alone,” he explained. “I'm sorry if I frightened you.”

Suzie studied him skeptically. She was fairly certain that he was just trying to trick them.

“Well, we're alone,” Suzie said and straightened her shoulders.

“It's about Daria,” he said softly.

“Okay,” Mary nodded. “We're listening.”

“The walls have ears,” he explained as he gestured towards the restaurant. “I'm not sure who I can trust.”

“We only want to help,” Suzie reminded him, though her expression remained stoic. She and Mary were in a very vulnerable position, hidden from view, with no one to hear them if they screamed.

“I think you might be the only people that can help,” Dominic admitted. His hardened visage abruptly crumbled into despair. “I thought that I had made sure she was safe. But I guess it wasn't good enough.”

“Tell us what you mean,” Suzie said. “How did you have her safe?”

“I think Baylor's taken her,” he admitted tearfully. “I thought I had her somewhere safe, but when I came back she was gone. No one knew where I was hiding her. He must have followed me,” he shook his head.

“Why were you hiding her?” Mary asked. “Did she kill Antony?”

“What?” Dominic shook his head sharply. “No, she didn't kill him. Neither of us did. I had to keep her safe from the person who

did kill Antony, and wants to kill her as well."

"I'm sorry," Suzie said with compassion. "We'll call the police right now and we'll find her."

"No!" Dominic shouted and abruptly grabbed Suzie hard by the shoulders. So hard that she winced in pain. "You can't call the police," he said desperately. "If Baylor gets wind of the police being involved he will kill her right away. There's no way I can protect her if the police are involved."

"But you have no idea where they are," Mary pointed out with a frown. "You might not be able to find her."

"I know Baylor," Dominic said and glanced at the floor. "We grew up together. I know every place he would go. I just want a chance to look for her, to find her myself."

"Baylor, your business partner?" Mary asked. "Why did he kill Antony?"

"It doesn't matter," Dominic groaned. "All that matters is getting Daria back home safe where she belongs. That's where you two come in. I want you to tell me everything you hear from the Garber police. Understand?"

Suzie and Mary exchanged a swift look. It didn't feel as if he was giving them a choice. Suzie knew that it was one thing to withhold information, it was quite another to share police information with a known criminal. She cleared her throat.

"We'll do the best we can," she said. "But what are you going to do if you find her?" Suzie asked. "I'm sure that Baylor isn't going to hand her over easily."

"He won't have a choice," Dominic said through gritted teeth. "I'm going to find Daria, I'm going to make sure that she's safe."

"I don't think you should do it alone," Mary warned, her sympathetic nature showing. "Suzie's cousin is a police officer in Garber, he can help you."

"The only way you can help me is to give me any information you get and to pretend you never saw me, never spoke to me," Dominic insisted. "Please, you have to give me a chance to get my daughter back alive. If you tell anyone that Baylor has her, she's going to die. Do you want to be responsible for that?" he demanded. "I've only told you as much as I have because I need some eyes and ears in Garber. Now I'm asking you, do you want my daughter's blood on your hands?" he asked sharply.

Suzie sighed and looked over at Mary. Mary shook her head

slowly.

“Then at least let us help you,” Suzie offered. “If we work together, we can help you find her faster.”

“No,” Dominic said firmly. “I can't have you do that. Baylor is a cutthroat. He will kill anyone who gets in his way without blinking. I never should have tried to cross him.”

“Why did you?” Suzie asked in a murmur. “Why did he take Daria in the first place?”

“I don't want to talk about it,” Dominic shook his head. “I just have to find her. So please, stay out of it. Don't go around asking questions. Anything like that could alert him to an investigation going on. If he knows that anyone talked to me I know that he'll kill her in a second.”

“Dominic, I hate to say this,” Mary said softly. “But you have to consider that he may have already. He didn't hesitate to kill Antony.”

“I know,” Dominic admitted, his voice trembling. “But there's more to this than just betrayal. We have a history. I can only hope that our history will be enough to keep my daughter alive.”

Suzie grimaced. She could only hope the same. As intimidating a man as Dominic was, she could see him crumbling before her very eyes at the thought of harm coming to his daughter. She couldn't help but see him as a father rather than a criminal.

“We'll do what we can,” Suzie said softly. “Will you keep us posted on what you find?”

“Yes, I can do that,” Dominic nodded. “But you must promise not to share any of the information I give you with the police. Not only will Baylor kill Daria if he finds out, any number of my clients will become quite upset if they find out I have had any contact with the police.”

“We won't share the information,” Suzie assured him. She rattled off her phone number to him. When he looked up at her again, his expression was tight and fearful.

“My Daria, she's a good girl,” he said shakily. “I've done many things that I'm not proud of, but she has always been the bright light in my life. I need to find her. If I don't, I don't know how I will survive.”

“Just make sure that you are careful,” Mary said. “No one is going to save her if the only person who can, is hurt or killed.”

“I can handle Baylor,” he said with a frown. “The only question

is how fast I can find him."

"If I get any information on a location, I will let you know," Suzie nodded.

Dominic smiled faintly with gratitude. But the smile soon faded. His expression shifted back into the granite slab it had been when they had first met him.

"Please ladies, don't make me regret confiding this information. I can promise you that I will do whatever it takes to protect my daughter. If you prove to be untrustworthy, then you are a risk to both my daughter and myself."

"We're trustworthy," Mary insisted before she turned away from him. Suzie followed right behind Mary as they walked towards the parking lot. Suzie's shoulders were tense and high as she expected that at any moment, Dominic might attack them from behind. When they reached the car unscathed and settled inside, Suzie finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"What do you think?" Mary asked as she looked over at her.

"I think we need to get out of here as fast as we can," Suzie replied as Mary pulled out of the parking lot. It wasn't until they were back inside of Garber that Suzie even dared to speak of what had just occurred.

"I don't know if we can trust him," Suzie said with concern.

"I can understand why," Mary nodded.

"Why would he tell us all of that information?" Suzie pointed out. "We're no one but a couple of women having lunch at a restaurant asking about his daughter. Why would he trust us and tell us so much about her?"

"Maybe he wanted help and felt we were the only people he could turn to," Mary suggested.

"I don't know," Suzie shook her head. "I think it's possible that he was setting us up for something. If it's true that his partner has Daria, she's in grave danger. I guess it doesn't matter what Dominic's intentions are."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

When Suzie and Mary returned to Dune House, Suzie was still a little troubled by not being able to reach Jason. She had considered stopping by the police station, but she didn't want to risk him asking about where she had been. She settled behind the computer at the front desk instead to do some research on both Dominic and Baylor. She was fairly experienced at digging up information on people. She wasn't convinced that Dominic was telling her the whole truth about the situation that he was facing. As she scrolled through articles, Mary prepared them something to eat.

“It just seems so odd to me that he doesn't want the police involved at all,” Mary said through the open kitchen door as she made them each a sandwich. The soup at the restaurant had not exactly been filling.

“Well, a man like Dominic doesn't exactly have the best track record with the police,” Suzie pointed out. “A lack of trust for the police has probably been handed down through his family.”

“Still,” Mary shook her head. “If it was one of my children, I wouldn't hesitate to seek out every resource I could find.”

“Maybe, since he thinks he knows who has Daria, he feels he can handle it,” Suzie frowned as she scanned an article about an apparent drive-by-shooting that Baylor was the prime suspect in. Several people were injured and two people had died. If Baylor had truly committed the crime then he seemed every bit as violent and uncaring as Dominic had described. Of course Suzie couldn't overlook that Dominic was also named as a suspect in the crime.

“I just hope he can,” Mary said as she walked over with Suzie's sandwich. “It's so hard to know what’s the right thing to do. With Daria's life probably hanging in the balance, I feel that we should tell Jason what we know, but at the same time, if Daria were to be

killed because we went to the police, I don't think I could ever forgive myself."

"It is tough," Suzie agreed. "But I think we have to let it be Dominic's decision right now. He's going to know how to handle Baylor better than any police officer could."

"Good point," Mary nodded and took a bite of her sandwich.

There was a light rap on the front door that drew Suzie's attention from the computer. She glanced up at Mary who was already walking towards the door. Neither had to speak to know what the other was thinking. Was it Daria outside the door? Was it Dominic? Suzie stood up from her chair as Mary opened the door. Mary froze for a moment.

"How can I help you, detective?" she asked.

Curious, Suzie began walking towards the door.

"I thought I'd pay a visit to see what the two of you were doing in Parish asking about Dominic Palov," he replied in a grim tone.

Suzie's heart skipped a beat as she recognized his voice. Detective Brown was not always the most pleasant man to be around. She stepped up beside Mary.

"Is it a crime to ask questions in your town?" Suzie asked with an edge to her voice.

"Not at all," Detective Brown replied with a slow smile. "But, whenever someone is asking about Palov, I make it my business to know why. I'll admit, knowing that it was you two asking questions made me even more curious and besides, I don't want either of you getting caught up with Palov, he's a very dangerous man."

Suzie took a slight step back. She was surprised that Detective Brown's intentions appeared to be good.

"Well, we weren't causing any trouble," Suzie said calmly.

"We were just following up about one of our guests who was staying here," Mary explained politely. "Nothing to be concerned about."

"I find that hard to believe," Detective Brown said as he looked from Suzie to Mary. "When it comes to the two of you I tend to think that you're always up to something."

"Detective Brown, why would you ever think such a thing?" Suzie asked with a slight laugh.

"This is no laughing matter," Detective Brown snapped. "I know that you were asking about him. I know that you were around his son-in-law's office."

Suzie was a little bit startled by his sudden change in demeanor. She recalled the men she had seen lingering by the corner of the office building. She had thought they might be criminals at the time, but now she thought that they were probably working with Detective Brown.

“Do you have him under surveillance?” she asked curiously.

“I'm the one asking the questions here,” Detective Brown shot back. Mary frowned.

“There's no need to be rude,” she said in quiet protest.

“I'm sorry,” he said, his gaze lingering on Mary. “When it comes to Dominic Palov, I can't afford to be polite. What I want to know is what business you have with Dominic Palov,” the detective said as he looked sternly between Mary and Suzie. “I heard you had a meeting with him today.”

“I wouldn't exactly call it a meeting,” Suzie said swiftly. “We just happened to run into each other.”

“Dominic Palov does not happen to run into anyone,” Detective Brown argued. “Now, come clean, ladies, I really don't want to turn this into an interrogation.”

“Is it a crime to speak to someone?” Mary asked and narrowed her eyes. Detective Brown met her gaze, he studied her for a long moment.

“No, it's not a crime. But it isn't wise to be alone with a man like that. He could have hurt you,” he cleared his throat and glanced over at Suzie. “Either of you.”

“Well, we're not hurt,” Suzie said.

“Look, I've been on Palov's trail for years now,” he explained. “I just want to know what you three talked about. If he's up to something I should know about, then I want an explanation.”

“It was only about his daughter,” Mary volunteered with a sigh.

“Mary,” Suzie warned.

“Suzie, he's a detective,” Mary said with a shrug. “We don't need to hide anything from him. Do we, Detective Brown?” she asked as she looked back at him with a sweet smile.

“It's Wes,” he said and met Mary's eyes again. “You can call me Wes if you like. You're right, my only interest is in helping here. Now, you know how police departments can be about jurisdiction. I know something happened here involving the Palov family, but I haven't been able to get an exact idea of what.”

“Is that why you're really here?” Suzie asked with annoyance.

“To get the scoop?”

“If you want to share,” Detective Brown shrugged. “If I can offer any help in the case, I'd be happy to. But I'd need to have an idea of what has happened. Your cousin has been pretty tight-lipped about the whole thing.”

“I think we should tell him, Suzie,” Mary said as she stepped closer to Detective Brown. “Who would know better how to help us find Daria than someone who has been investigating the Palovs for so long?”

Suzie's heart began to race. She thought of Daria being held somewhere and helpless. She thought of the repercussions if they told Detective Brown about their concerns, and the potential consequences if they didn't.

“No, Mary,” she said quietly. “We can't risk it.”

“Can't risk what?” Detective Brown demanded as he studied both of them. He took a slight step closer to the two women. “I think you need to start coming clean about what's really going on here.”

“Look, we did meet with Dominic today,” Mary said all at once. Suzie could tell that she was about to confess everything.

“We met with him about his daughter,” Suzie interrupted swiftly. “She and her husband Antony had been staying here, and as I am sure you know Antony ended up dead.” She noted a hint of sadness in Detective Brown’s eyes but she carried on talking. “There's an investigation into Antony’s death, and Palov's daughter, Daria, is missing. We just thought, as a courtesy, we would return Daria's things that she left behind here to her father. If it was your child, wouldn't you want someone to do the same?” Suzie pointed out. She could feel Mary's eyes settled on her with disapproval, but she ignored it. She certainly didn't trust Detective Brown to keep things quiet, and she couldn't knowingly put Daria at more risk than she likely already was in.

“So, you just paid him a cordial visit?” Detective Brown asked with disbelief. “You couldn't have mailed it, or had one of the officers take it to him?”

“That's a little impersonal, don't you think?” Suzie asked as she studied him intently.

“So, Dominic Palov's son-in-law really is dead,” Detective Brown said with more sadness than she expected him to show. “I couldn’t find out much about what was going on because it isn’t my

jurisdiction, you know how Parish and Garber don't like sharing information. I was hoping Antony's death would just land up being a rumor," he sighed.

"It's a tragedy for Dominic," Suzie volunteered, hoping to steer him away from Dominic as a suspect.

"You must really think I'm an idiot," Detective Brown said with dismay. "As if I don't know what was really happening between Palov and Antony Gable."

"What do you mean?" Suzie asked hesitantly. She wondered if she had managed to lie herself into a corner.

"I mean that Antony Gable was my inside man," Detective Brown said grimly. "That's why I came here to see what was going on. He was going to turn on Dominic Palov in exchange for a relocation into the Witness Protection Program with his wife, Daria. I have been working with him and the FBI. He had so much information on Dominic Palov's clients that he was going to give me," he cringed and rubbed lightly at his forehead. "I warned him. I told him no matter what he did, not to tip off anyone that he was speaking to me. He must have told someone."

"Oh, wow," Mary said as she placed a hand lightly against her lips. "Now, who is the one that was lying?" she demanded. "You should have told us that from the start."

"It was on a need to know basis," Detective Brown explained as he narrowed his eyes. "It's a very delicate matter when you have someone going against his very powerful, very vengeful father-in-law. Dominic would have done anything to protect his clients."

"He's not so bad," Mary said with a mild shrug. Detective Brown's eyes locked on hers.

"Don't be fooled," he said sharply. "Dominic Palov may look handsome, he may play a good part when he's trying to manipulate people, but he is a distinctly cruel man. He has killed for less than any man I have encountered. He is not someone that people cross and survive. If Antony Gable is dead I can guarantee you that Dominic Palov was involved in that death at the very least, and more than likely is the killer himself," he shook his head. "You can't be fooled by a pretty face."

"I really didn't notice his pretty face," Mary said with growing annoyance. "But what I did notice was that he seemed genuinely concerned with his daughter's wellbeing, as any father would be."

"Not this one," Detective Brown said flatly. "If Daria is missing

it's likely that she's laying dead somewhere, and I wouldn't put it past Dominic Palov to be the one who put the bullet in her head."

"That's a terrible thing to say," Mary rushed forward, her words becoming more biting. "No one would ever intentionally harm their own child."

"You're living in a dream world I'm afraid," Detective Brown said in a softer tone and shook his head. "Not all parents are created equal, Mary. Just because he plays the part of the doting father, doesn't mean he is one," he smiled apologetically at her.

Mary stared at him for a long moment. Then she looked over at Suzie, as if looking for permission to tell Detective Brown the entire truth about their encounter with Dominic. Suzie shook her head slightly.

"What's that?" Detective Brown demanded when he noticed the slight shake of Suzie's head. "You two know more than you're saying, don't you?" he asked and glared at each of them in turn.

Suzie opened her mouth to speak, but Detective Brown was already shaking his head.

"I'm giving you both the chance right now to tell me the truth," he said in a paternal tone. "Whatever you and Dominic talked about today is police business. You two are not police officers," he reminded them. "You own a bed and breakfast. You are not equipped to handle a criminal like this. So, tell me the truth, right now, and if you've done anything you shouldn't have, it will be overlooked."

Mary's lips moved slightly. She looked over at Suzie. Suzie narrowed her eyes. Mary lowered hers.

"There is nothing to tell," Suzie said with confidence to Detective Brown. "We had a short conversation with Dominic about his grief over his daughter being missing and the loss of his beloved son-in-law. I'm sorry that you lost your informant, but I really don't think that Dominic had anything to do with it."

"Don't bother lying to me," he growled. "I've heard enough. I'll find out what's really going on from Jason. If you two have done anything to put yourselves, or my investigation at risk, I'm going to find out about it."

He paused at the front door and looked back at the two women. He stared at Suzie for a long moment as if he was sizing her up, then he looked over at Mary.

"Do not go anywhere near Dominic Palov, do you understand

me?" he asked sternly. "I would hate to be investigating your murder next."

Mary nodded wordlessly. She looked squeamishly over at Suzie who kept her gaze locked directly on Detective Brown.

"Thank you for your concern," Suzie said rigidly as she crossed the distance between them. "I think you'll have better luck trying to get information out of Jason," she added and opened the door for him.

"Remember what I said," Detective Brown said and glared sharply at both of them. "Dominic Palov can play a docile sheep, but he is the fiercest wolf you will ever meet."

With that he turned and stepped out through the door. Suzie closed the door firmly behind him, then locked it. When she turned back to look at Mary, she could see the deep concern in the woman's normally soft features.

"Maybe we should have told him," she said nervously. "What if he's right? What if Dominic is involved in Daria's disappearance?"

"If he was then why would he bother saying anything to us about it?" Suzie pointed out as she walked over to her friend. "Why would he claim that she was taken by his partner?"

"Maybe to try to get information from us about the case," Mary suggested. "Maybe he killed Antony, but Daria got away. That would explain why we found that tuft from her sweater deep in the woods. Maybe she was escaping from her father."

"I don't know," Suzie shook her head. "He seemed very upset to me."

"Maybe he was only upset because he can't find her to get rid of her," Mary suggested with disgust. "Detective Brown has a lot of experience with this man. He probably knows what he's really like better than we do."

"He might," Suzie agreed. "But cops sometimes get tunnel vision about criminals. Just because Dominic is a terrible man who has done terrible things, that doesn't mean that he has done this terrible thing."

"I guess you're right," Mary sighed. "I just hope Daria can get somewhere safe."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

Before going to bed that night Suzie made sure that all of the doors and windows were locked in Dune House. She also double checked on Mary to make sure she was safely in her room. She slid into her bed uneasily. She kept recalling how close she must have come to discovering that someone was hiding in the closet. She hadn't even considered that there might be someone there before she had left the room. Was that person Baylor, Dominic's murderous partner? Or was it possibly Dominic himself?

Despite what she had said to Detective Brown, Suzie was still not entirely convinced that Dominic was not involved in his daughter's disappearance. He seemed to have quite a bit of reason to want to hurt Antony, and keep his daughter from talking. Those thoughts, and thoughts about why Jason was avoiding her phone calls, kept her awake for some time. When she finally drifted off to sleep, her dreams were filled with memories of Antony and Daria. She had not known them for long, but they had made quite an impression.

Suzie woke up early the next morning to someone pounding on the front door of Dune House. As her sleep-deprived mind slowly began to process her surroundings, she realized that her cell phone was also ringing loudly. She stumbled towards her phone and carried it out into the hall. She nearly collided with Mary who was hurrying to find out who was at the door. Suzie looked at her phone to see it was Jason calling. Which meant he was probably the one at the door, too. Mary opened it just as Suzie was stepping out from the hallway.

“Sorry to wake you,” Jason said as he looked between the two women. Suzie could see the anger in his expression even though she was half way across the room. “I tried to wait until later, but I just

couldn't. I need to talk to you, Suzie."

Mary glanced over her shoulder at Suzie warily. "I think I should stay," she said quietly.

"No, it's okay," Suzie assured her. "Let's step outside," she suggested to Jason. Jason nodded and stepped back out onto the porch. Suzie drew her robe tightly around her and turned to face Jason.

"What is this about?" she asked.

"You know what it's about," he replied with a frown. "Kirk told me how much you were hiding from me. I just got the results of the fingerprints in, and now we have a prime suspect that we are looking to arrest. If you had told me about your suspicions about someone being in the room earlier, we could have closed this case already."

Suzie was dying to know who the fingerprints matched, but she knew that Jason needed to say his piece first.

"Jason, I just didn't realize that it was important at the time," Suzie attempted to explain. "I thought I was being paranoid."

"You've made me look like a complete fool," Jason said with animosity. "What were you thinking holding that information back from me?"

"Jason, I just didn't think it mattered, I thought I was just being paranoid," Suzie repeated. "I would have told you if I thought it was important."

"You don't get to decide that," he pointed out. "I trusted you enough to give you information about the investigation. How could you not trust me enough to tell me everything you knew?"

Suzie could barely look at him. The betrayal he felt was so clear in his expression that she couldn't stand to look at him. It was hard for her not to see Jason as a kid, despite the fact that he was a grown man with a successful career as a police officer. She hadn't given him the chance to prove that he could be trusted not to run off and treat Daria as the murderer. Instead, she had hurt their relationship by being so paranoid. Now, she had to hide even more from him, because she knew that if Dominic found out she had told Jason the truth, there would be a big price to pay.

"I'm sorry, Jason," she finally said and glanced up at him. "There's no excuse I can give really. I just honestly didn't think that we were going to find out that Daria had anything to do with it. I didn't want overhearing a little spat between husband and wife to

destroy the rest of her life."

"And what about Antony?" Jason asked and studied her with disdain. "Didn't he deserve to have every possibility investigated? If it had been the other way around, Suzie, if it had been Antony threatening Daria, would you have come to me right away?"

Suzie was a little stunned by the question. She hadn't really considered that. But now that she thought about it, she felt Jason was right. If it had been Antony threatening to kill Daria, she would have been quick to interfere with the argument, or at least let the police know of the threat. She had given Daria much more leeway because she was a woman.

"I didn't think of it that way," she stammered out.

"There's a reason why police officers are taught to be objective," Jason said patiently. "It's because a murder suspect doesn't always look like a murder suspect. Sometimes they look like a sweet, young woman who would never harm a fly. Until she does."

"You're right," Suzie nodded. "I should have told you from the beginning. I'm sorry, Jason," she met his eyes with genuine remorse.

"I get that you've been taught to question everyone's intentions in your previous career," Jason said with a slight frown. "I guess I just didn't expect that I would be included on that list."

"You're not, Jason," Suzie insisted. "That's not what happened. I just didn't want to bother you with the information if it didn't mean anything."

"Well, it did," he sighed. "At least now we know who killed Antony."

"Who?" Suzie asked as she met his gaze. "Whose fingerprints did you find?"

Jason studied her for a moment. "I'm not sure I should tell you," he said grimly.

"Jason, please," Suzie said as she looked into his eyes.

Jason finally nodded. "All right, but only so you can be wary of this person in case you come across them before we arrest them. The prints from the room match Dominic Palov. We have a warrant out for his arrest."

Suzie was stunned by the revelation. If anything, she had expected the prints to match Bob Baylor. If the prints matched Dominic's that meant that he was the one who was hiding in the closet when she was in the room. Yet he hadn't told her that. Her

stomach flipped. Had he truly been manipulating her the entire time?

“Now listen, once we find Dominic, I'm sure we'll find Daria. So, as of now, I want you staying out of this case,” Jason said sternly. “Dominic Palov is a highly dangerous criminal and not someone you want to tangle with.”

“I hear you, Jason,” she finally said and nodded.

“We'll talk more about this, hmm?” he said as he met her eyes.

“Yes,” Suzie nodded again. She had no intention of talking more about it. Her only intention was to talk to Summer. Maybe Summer could give her information to prove that Dominic wasn't the murderer. She was afraid that if Dominic ended up in jail Daria would never be found. Of course, nagging in the back of her mind was the very real possibility that Dominic had been the killer all along.

When she walked back into Dune House, Mary was waiting for her.

“What did he say?” she asked nervously.

“He said that he was upset I hadn't told him everything,” Suzie said with a frown. “He also said that the fingerprints they found in the Gables' room belonged to Dominic Palov.”

“What?” Mary asked with surprise. “Does that mean he was in the room?”

“I can only assume it does,” Suzie said. “I guess he might have been lying to us the entire time.”

“I don't know,” Mary shook her head. “I know he's a criminal mastermind and everything, but he is a father also and he seemed to be genuinely upset about Daria.”

“Well, if he gets arrested then Daria might be in even more danger,” Suzie said. “I'm getting dressed and going down to the medical examiner's office to talk to Summer. Would you mind staying here and seeing what you can find about Bob Baylor on the internet?”

“I can do my best,” Mary said with a slight cringe. “You know I’m not as good as you with technology. I just know how to do a basic search.”

“Don't worry, you can handle it,” Suzie promised her.

After Suzie dressed she set Mary up with a search engine and showed her the best ways to search for the information. “See if you can find any properties he might own, places he might be hiding

Daria," Suzie suggested.

As she left Dune House it was not lost on her that yet again she was keeping something from Jason. With a woman's life on the line however, she couldn't justify turning over a new leaf of honesty.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

When Suzie arrived at the medical examiner's office it was just opening to the public. Suzie could see the receptionist, Sharon, trudging in from her car. She wanted to avoid her, so she ducked around the side of the building, hoping to catch Summer on her way inside. She spotted Summer walking away from her car and breathed a sigh of relief. Just as she was about to walk up to her, she noticed a man walking towards Summer from the other side of the parking lot. She immediately gasped as she recognized him as Dominic Palov.

Suzie stepped back behind the large, stone pillar. She peered around it, and watched as Dominic approached Summer. Her heart fluttered with fear as she wondered what such a dangerous man could want with Summer. Was he going to try to intimidate her about her findings? Dominic paused in front of her, and began speaking in a voice too low for Suzie to hear. Suzie didn't dare to try to get closer, as she knew that if she was spotted Summer might be upset that she was spying on her. She didn't want to do anything that might put more strain on her relationship with Jason.

Summer didn't seem to be upset by Dominic's presence. She spoke to him in the same low tones, but Suzie noticed that she stepped intimately close to the man. Alarm bells began ringing in the back of Suzie's mind as she wondered what Summer's intentions might be. Dominic was a powerful, handsome man. He was several years older than Jason, but certainly still attractive.

Suzie's inquisitive mind began to spin possible reasons that Summer could be so familiar with Dominic. But none of those reasons came close to explaining what happened next. She watched as Summer reached into the slim briefcase she wore over her shoulder. She pulled out a small, yellow envelope and handed it to

Dominic. Dominic took it swiftly. He reached into the front pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a pair of reading glasses. He then set them carefully on his nose. Then he peeked under the flap of the envelope for a moment, and nodded. He reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out another envelope. This one he handed over to Summer. Then he tucked the one she handed him into the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

Suzie's heart sank. Of all the things she had imagined, the idea that Summer might be crooked, making dodgy deals and being potentially paid off by criminals had never crossed her mind. She would have never believed it if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes. The two spoke quietly for a few more moments, then Dominic turned and walked away.

Summer stood still for several seconds. Then she swept her hair back over her shoulders. She cast her gaze around the sidewalk and the front of the building, as if she was checking to see if anyone was watching. Suzie held her breath as she wondered if she would be spotted. She had to resist the desire to confront Summer there and then about what she had just handed over to Dominic. She knew it wasn't the right time. Now, everything Summer had revealed to her had come into question. She knew that the police investigation could be just as tainted. She felt obligated to tell Jason. But how could she? It would shatter his heart. After the difficult life he had led so far, what right did she have to make it that much worse? Would he even believe her, considering the secrets she had kept?

Suzie's stomach was churning with emotions as she watched Summer walk towards the entrance of the building and disappear inside. She felt as if she was watching Jason's future with Summer walking away right along with her. As Suzie walked back to her car, her mind returned to the crime at hand. She was beginning to wonder just how far-reaching Dominic's influence might be. For a split-second she wondered if Jason might know about Summer's connection to Dominic. If he did, maybe that was part of the reason he was intent on arresting Dominic. However, if Dominic was arrested, what would stop him from revealing the truth about Summer?

When Suzie started the car an image flashed in her mind. The crushed glasses in the sandy dirt beside the wreckage of the car. Suzie's heart pounded harder. Had Dominic been at the accident? She had to get to the bottom of all of this, before it cost Daria her

life.

Suzie drove straight to the Garber police station. When it came to Summer, she wasn't going to risk anything. Whether or not she was involved in some kind of cover up, Summer was a friend of Jason's, and she needed to make sure that she was safe. When she arrived at the police station, Jason was just stepping outside. He paused on the sidewalk and watched as she parked her car. Suzie walked up to him, and noticed that his expression was less welcoming than usual. She could tell that he was still upset with her. She pushed those thoughts out of her mind.

“Jason, can we take a walk?” she asked.

“As long as it's quick,” Jason said with a frown. “I'm trying to track down Dominic, and we’ve had a tip off of where he might be.”

“It will be quick,” she promised. Together they began walking down the long sidewalk towards the parking lot that housed the patrol cars.

“How well do you really know Summer?” Suzie asked in a casual tone. She was trying to remain as calm as possible. Jason set his hand on the hilt of his gun and lifted his eyes to meet Suzie's.

“I'm sorry?” he asked with a hint of defensiveness. “What kind of question is that?”

“Just a question,” Suzie replied and held his gaze. Though they hadn't known each other for long she hoped she had given Jason plenty of reason to trust her. Unfortunately, after she had failed to tell him important information she wasn't sure if he still did trust her. She could clearly see the suspicion in his eyes.

“I know her well,” he replied and slowly folded his arms across his chest as he looked at her. “We've gotten to know each other quite well, lately, actually.”

“Are you sure about that?” Suzie asked. “With your career you

have to be careful who you associate with…"

"What is this about?" Jason suddenly snapped. Suzie realized from the flush in his cheeks that she had pushed things too far too fast.

"Look, I like Summer, you know I do. But sometimes we can assume that we know everything about someone, only to find out far too late that we might have assumed too much."

Jason settled his gaze intently on Suzie. "Maybe you should just tell me what you're getting at," he said in his official police officer tone. "If you know something about Summer that you think I should be aware of, you should tell me. Or are you trying to hide information from me yet again?" he asked.

Suzie froze. She knew that if she revealed the truth about Summer it might just break Jason's heart. In fact Summer might even get into legal trouble, considering she had met with a wanted and actively pursued criminal without revealing his location to local law enforcement. But the truth was, she didn't know exactly what there was to tell. Summer had always been kind to her, and had never given her a reason not to trust her.

"I'm just suggesting that before you get in too deep, you should be cautious," Suzie explained and grimaced slightly. "Listen Jason, I've been through many things in my life, but by far being hurt by someone you care about is the worst experience."

"What do you mean?" Jason asked.

"All I'm saying is to be cautious, Jason, be cautious."

"I feel like you're keeping things from me again," Jason frowned. "What I can't figure out is why after all that we've been through since you came to Garber, you still don't trust me."

"It isn't like that, Jason," Suzie attempted to assure him. "I do trust you. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"So, tell me what you know about Summer," Jason requested and locked eyes with her. "I know you're hiding something, Suzie. What is it?"

"I'm just a little shaken up with all of this," Suzie attempted to be dismissive. "Two days ago I would have told you that Antony and Daria were head over heels in love. But the more I learn about their lives, the more I realize that they probably didn't share many of the same beliefs and might not even have gotten along that well."

"So, all of this is about some friendly advice," Jason said with

disbelief in his voice. “You came all the way here just to warn me about falling in love with Summer?”

“Cousins have to look out for each other, Jason,” Suzie said with a slight smile. Jason stared hard at her, his expression stiff. Suzie could tell that he didn't believe a word of what she was saying. She wouldn’t have believed him either if it was the other way around.

“I'll keep that in mind,” he said quietly. Then he glanced over to the parking lot where his car was parked. Kirk Rondella was leaning up against the side of it. “Now, if you don't mind, I have a murderer to find.” Suzie knew that the conversation was over. What she didn't know was whether Jason would take her advice and be cautious about Summer.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12

With Jason on the hunt for Dominic, Suzie knew that she wouldn't likely hear from Dominic any time soon. She was actually relieved to think that. She had once believed he wasn't involved with his son-in-law's death, but after hearing that his fingerprints had been inside the room and seeing what she believed might be a pair of his reading glasses at the scene, she was now beginning to change her mind. She still needed to find Daria, however. She hoped that Mary might have found something regarding a location for Bob Baylor. When she stepped back into Dune House she found Mary still hunched over in front of the computer.

"Mary," Suzie called out.

"Suzie, I didn't hear you come in," she said softly.

"Did you find out anything about Bob Baylor?" Suzie asked as she paused in front of the desk.

"Nothing good," Mary said darkly and gestured for Suzie to join her behind the computer. "The things this man has done could put serial killers to shame. I've never seen anything like it before."

Suzie cringed at some of the reports that were up on the computer monitor. Everything from murder for hire, to taking out random people in the midst of road rage.

"Looks like Bob Baylor has an anger problem," Suzie said with growing concern. If Bob Baylor really does have Daria then she was in a lot of trouble if he lost his temper. "What about locations?" she asked. "Did you find anything that might make sense?"

"I found a few places owned by Baylor," Mary explained. "But most of them are tenant occupied, one is a convenience store. There's only one place that I think he might be using. It's empty, and practically abandoned."

"Let's go check it out," Suzie said gravely. "The sooner we find

Daria, the better."

"Did you get any information from Summer?" Mary asked.

"No, I didn't get to see her," Suzie hesitated before she continued. "You will not believe what I did see though."

"What?" Mary asked inquisitively.

"Well, when I pulled up at her office she was standing outside with Dominic and they exchanged envelopes," Suzie said in disbelief.

"That sounds ominous," Mary replied cautiously.

"I know, it was very weird," Suzie said with a frown. "I have no idea what was happening, but it was very concerning."

"Did you tell Jason what you saw?"

"Not exactly," Suzie shook her head. "I want to hear the truth from Summer before I tell him anything."

"That's probably for the best," Mary agreed. "I'd hate to think that Summer was involved in anything criminal."

"I don't know if anything involving Dominic Palov could be anything but criminal," Suzie pointed out as they left Dune House. She glanced down at her phone when it chimed, announcing she had a text message. It was from Paul.

Will be home soon. I want to hear about everything that is going on. Please behave yourself.

Suzie raised an eyebrow at that. She knew he was telling her to keep out of trouble. She wondered if hunting down a murderer would qualify as behaving. She shoved her phone back into her purse.

"Do you mind driving?" Suzie asked.

"Not at all," Mary replied. Once they were in the car, Suzie stared out across the water. She thought of Paul out there, starting to make his way back to shore. She hoped that everything would be resolved before he arrived. She didn't want anything to dampen their reunion. It wasn't long before Mary was steering into the parking lot of a warehouse. It was in good shape, except that it looked completely empty.

"Are you sure this is the right address?" Suzie whispered as she and Mary approached the warehouse.

"It's the only business I found that is no longer actively in use. There hasn't even been a payment made on the property taxes this

year," Mary explained.

"I think you're getting pretty good at this research thing," Suzie said with a short laugh. The laughter did nothing to break the tension. They both knew that they were trying to sneak up on a man who was a violent criminal.

"There," Mary whispered and pointed to a car that was parked alongside the building. "That must be his car."

"Which means that he must be inside," Suzie said grimly. "Park over there, behind that auto shop," Suzie instructed. "That way if he looks out the window, he won't think anyone is here."

"Okay," Mary nodded and parked the car behind the auto shop. There were no cars in the lot they parked in either.

"Maybe you should stay here," Suzie said as she stepped out of the car.

"There is no way I'm letting you go anywhere near that warehouse without me," Mary said sternly, leaving no room for argument. As they moved closer to the building, Suzie felt a sense of dread building within her. She felt as if she was putting Mary in danger. But Mary was walking beside her with sheer determination. As soon as they reached the wall of the warehouse they flattened against the side of it.

"Shh," Suzie said when she heard footsteps approaching. The two women remained as still and quiet as possible. Suzie had to bite her tongue when she saw Dominic skulking around the side of the building. Was he working with Baylor? Was he the one who was holding his daughter?

"Let's follow him," Suzie whispered. As they slowly followed after him, Suzie watched Dominic pause beside the entrance to the warehouse. He pushed on the door. The door swung open easily. What Suzie heard next made her stomach lurch and her body tense. It was Dominic's piercing scream. The scream mingled with the sounds of sirens approaching.

"Suzie, we have to get out of here," Mary said and grabbed at her arm quickly.

"Do you think it's her?" Suzie said somberly. "Do you think it's Daria?"

The car that had been parked beside the warehouse squealed out of the parking lot. Suzie and Mary started to turn back towards their car, which was hidden in the next parking lot, but before they could patrol cars were screaming into the parking lot. Suzie tugged

Mary towards a dumpster. They ducked down behind it. Suzie could see Dominic stumble out of the warehouse.

“Put your hands up!” Jason shouted as he ran towards Dominic, his gun already drawn.

Dominic didn't put his hands up, but he did sink down to his knees. From what Suzie could see, it looked like he was crying.

“She's inside,” he whispered. “Daria's inside.”

Jason cuffed Dominic and then gestured for some other officers to go inside the warehouse.

“Dominic Palov, you're under arrest for the murder of Antony Gable,” Jason announced sternly and with adrenaline powering his voice.

“Jason, better make that two murders,” a voice said from inside the warehouse. Detective Brown was just walking up to the scene. He swept his gaze over Dominic.

“Well, Dominic, it looks like your lucky run has finally come to an end,” he said with a touch of gloating in his voice.

“Do you think I care?” Dominic abruptly shouted up at the man. “Do you think I care?” he said again.

“We should go while Jason's inside the warehouse,” Mary whispered.

Suzie nodded. It was hard for her to pull her gaze away from Dominic whose expression of dread made her certain that either he had found something shocking inside the warehouse, or he was terrified of going to jail. Mary gave Suzie's hand a light tug. They slipped out from behind the dumpster and across to the other parking lot. When they reached the car they hurried to get inside. With all of the flashing lights and blaring sirens it was easy for them to slip away.

“Do you think it was Bob Baylor in the car?” Suzie asked.

“I'm not sure,” Mary replied. “Do you think it was Daria in the warehouse?”

“I hope not,” Suzie whispered. “But if Dominic is being arrested we can't wait any longer to talk to Summer. We need to warn her about Dominic’s arrest and try to find out what her business was with him, before it comes out in the interrogation room.”

“You're right,” Mary agreed. “We need to get to her before the police have a chance to.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

The first place that Suzie and Mary stopped to look for Summer was the medical examiner's office. But Sharon informed them that Summer was not in. Suzie managed to get her home address with a little fibbing, a bit of persuasive chatter and a promise of a free night at Dune House. As they drove towards Summer's home address, Suzie felt the tension building within her. She wanted the truth from Summer.

“It's just two streets down,” Suzie instructed Mary who was gazing steadily through the windshield.

“Do you think it was Daria, Suzie?” Mary asked nervously. “Are we too late?”

“From the look on Dominic’s face, honestly, I do think it was her,” Suzie admitted in a whisper. “Which means that Dominic has nothing left to lose.”

Mary turned down Summer's street.

“It's the third house on the right,” Suzie said. “But park further down the block. We don't want to give her a reason not to answer the door.”

“Good point,” Mary agreed. She parked the car between two driveways. Then the two began walking back towards her house. As they were walking, Suzie saw Summer's car turn down the street. She pulled Mary back behind a large tree.

“She's coming home,” she whispered.

“I see her,” Mary nodded and stayed hidden.

“Let's wait until she gets out of the car, then we can catch her before she goes inside,” Suzie said.

“Are you sure about this?” Mary asked as she stood nervously beside Suzie.

“I want to give her a chance to give me an explanation,” Suzie

explained as she watched Summer park her car in her driveway. “I don't want to ruin things between her and Jason if there's some possibility that I misunderstood what I saw.”

“Shouldn't that be Jason's choice?” Mary asked softly. “How do you think he would feel about you keeping something like this from him?”

“Mary, you know as well, if not better than I do, what it feels like when someone you love has been lying to you or deceiving you. I don't want to put Jason through that if it's not necessary,” Suzie sighed. “If it were your son, Benjamin?” she asked. “Wouldn't you do anything you could to protect him from that kind of pain?”

Mary smiled fondly at Suzie. “I think it's sweet that you want to protect Jason. I just think you're forgetting that he may be just a kid to you and me, but he's an adult, and a police officer. I don't think I'd like being left out of the loop like this.”

“If there's anything to loop him into, I'll let him know,” Suzie assured her. Then she began walking towards Summer's house. Summer had paused at her front door to unlock it. The house was small, quite modest considering the professional salary that Summer most likely brought home. Suzie noticed that the yard was a little unkempt and there was no sign of decorations.

“Summer,” Suzie said as she walked up behind her. Summer spun around swiftly, her eyes wide as they met Suzie's.

“Oh Suzie, you scared me,” she said breathlessly.

“I'm sorry,” Suzie said, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Who did you think it was?”

“No one,” Summer said swiftly and tried to regain her composure. “I was just startled. What can I help you with, Suzie?”

“I have something I need to ask you,” Suzie explained.

“If it's about the case, can it wait until tomorrow?” Summer requested. “I'm quite tired.”

“No, it can't wait,” Suzie said firmly as Mary walked up beside her. “It's not exactly about the case.”

“Then what is it about?”

“It's about a man you met with this morning,” Suzie explained. “A man that is not exactly the most honest character.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Summer shook her head with a forced smile. “I didn't meet with any man.”

“So, you've never met with or spoken to Dominic Palov?” Suzie asked. She adjusted the purse strap on her shoulder and locked eyes

with Summer.

“Dominic Palov,” Summer repeated nervously. “I've heard of him of course. But Suzie, what are you implying?” Summer asked as she folded her arms across her chest.

“I'm not implying anything,” Suzie replied sternly. “I'm asking you directly, how do you know Dominic Palov?”

Summer narrowed her eyes. She glanced past Suzie at Mary, and then looked reluctantly back to Suzie.

“I don't really think that's any of your business.”

“I just don’t want Jason to get hurt,” Suzie said with increasing frustration. “If you're involved in this case and Dominic is somehow influencing you…”

“Suzie!” Summer gasped out and glared at her. “Are you accusing me of taking bribes from Dominic Palov in exchange for distorting evidence?” she demanded.

“I just want to know the truth,” Suzie said quietly, “I saw you outside the medical examiner's office with him. I saw him hand you an envelope. I know that he paid you for something.”

“Do you know that?” Summer snapped in return. “You know, Suzie, sometimes I wonder if Jason is really the police officer in your family. You seem to have quite an inquisitive nature.” Though her words could have been taken as a compliment, Suzie could tell from the hard edge to Summer's voice that they weren't meant as a compliment.

“That doesn't answer the question,” Suzie pointed out impatiently, ignoring Summer's remarks.

“Okay fine,” Summer sighed and held her hands up in surrender. “If you want to be nosy, I'll satisfy your need even if it really is none of your business.”

She glanced up and down the street to make sure no one but Suzie and Mary were close enough to hear her. “When you saw me outside with Dominic, he didn't hand me money. I handed him money.”

“You were making a shady investment with Dominic?” Suzie gasped with surprise.

“No,” Summer frowned. “I was paying off one. In exchange he handed me the deeds to this house, and my parents' house.”

“Why would he have the deeds?” Mary asked with surprise.

“My parents fell on hard times, unfortunately they didn't tell me about it until it was too late. They got involved with Dominic Palov

in an attempt to get their finances in order. They are just proud people, who made a bad decision," she explained with a sigh. "I couldn't risk going to the police about it, because I was worried that we might lose both houses, or worse put my parents in jail."

"You could have told Jason," Suzie said softly.

"It wouldn't have been fair to him," Summer pointed out. "He would have been obligated to report the crime. I didn't want to put him in that position. Especially since we've really only just started dating seriously. Of course Dominic took full advantage and just milked them for money. Every time they tried to make a payment, he just kept raising the interest. By the time they told me the truth about it, they had already turned over the deed to their house. I had to give him the deed to mine to keep him from taking their house from them. It took a month or two to get the money together that they owed him, but I paid him off. Today I was making the last payment, and he was returning the deeds to me. That is what you saw," she said grimly. "You can believe me or not believe me, but that is the truth. If you feel like you have to tell Jason, I'll understand."

"No," Suzie shook her head. "There's no need for me to tell him anything. You've already handled the situation. But you should know that I think Dominic Palov might be arrested soon and honestly if he is I'd be concerned that he might try to implicate you." Suzie was trying to warn Summer about Dominic's arrest without actually letting her know that they were aware that he had already been arrested.

"So, I should tell Jason," Summer said in a murmur. A blush of shame arose in her cheeks.

"You did what you had to do for your family," Suzie said. "Jason will understand that. I'm sorry for the difficulty that your family was facing," Suzie said cordially. "But Dominic and his partner have a very dangerous history."

"I know," Summer sighed. "You have to understand how important my parents' house is to them. My father built the back porch on that house. He engraved it with all of our initials. I wasn't about to let Dominic take it from them. Yes, I shouldn't have gotten involved with him, but if I had gone to the police he would have made things much worse for my parents. Can you honestly tell me that you've never done something you knew wasn't quite right for someone that you cared about?" Summer asked as she looked

between the two women. “I wasn't going to make my parents suffer just because of moral standards.”

“It's understandable,” Mary said softly. “It was very kind of you to help your parents.”

“Kind maybe,” Summer frowned. “But not exactly legal. If my boss were to find out…”

“We're not telling anyone,” Suzie assured her. “But like I said, I do think it would be a good idea to talk to Jason about it.”

“Maybe I will,” Summer said with a slight nod. “I can't say I'd be unhappy if Dominic is arrested,” she said as she started to turn towards her house, but her cell phone began to ring. She paused to answer it. “Hi Jason, I need to talk to you about something…” she hesitated. She glanced briefly at Suzie and Mary. “I understand, I'll be right there,” she said in a professional tone. She hung up the phone and looked at the two of them again. “I've been called to a crime scene. The two of you should head back to Dune House and stay put until all of this settles down.”

“That’s the plan,” Suzie agreed.

As she and Mary walked back towards the car, Suzie had an unsettling certainty that Daria was the body Summer would be tending to.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

When Suzie and Mary arrived back at Dune House, they were both quite somber.

“We don't know for sure it was her,” Mary said in an attempt to soothe Suzie.

“I think we do,” Suzie replied in a murmur and set her purse down on the kitchen counter. “What I don't believe is that Dominic is the one who killed her.”

“He was there,” Mary reminded her.

“I believe it was only because he was looking for Baylor,” Suzie sighed. “Just like we were. Did you see his face when he came out of the room?” she shook her head. “I don't believe that was fake. I don't believe that anyone can fake that kind of grief,” she swallowed thickly. She didn't mention that she had seen grief like that before and it was moments like those that had driven her out of her previous job and into the much more peaceful experience of interior decorating. It seemed as if since she had settled in Garber, however, the town was designed to bring the investigator out in her.

“We need to eat,” Mary said. “Let me make us something.”

Suzie nodded with a small smile of appreciation. She knew that Mary's way of dealing with emotional situations was to cook and feed people. She adored her friend's comforting nature. It was not something that seemed to come naturally to Suzie.

She settled down at the table and pulled out her cell phone to text Paul. Before she could, her cell phone was ringing. She saw that it was Jason and answered it.

“Hello?” she said. Silently she reminded herself to be careful not to reveal that she and Mary had been at the crime scene.

“Suzie, it's not good,” Jason said with darkness in his voice.

“What is it, Jason?” she asked, bracing herself.

“I shouldn't even be telling you this, but I think you need to know,” he sighed. “We just found Daria's body.”

“Daria's dead?” Suzie asked with a mixture of genuine and feigned shock. “How?”

“A bullet to the head,” Jason sighed. “Execution style, Suzie. Cold, like it was a professional hit.”

“Where was she all of this time?” Suzie asked carefully, not wanting to give away that she already knew quite a bit. “Was someone holding her captive?”

“Well, we found her in a warehouse on the outskirts of Garber, near Parish. This is going to be a joint investigation now. But that's not the strangest thing,” he paused a moment to give direction to someone at the scene. When he started talking again he had lowered his voice, “She had a fraudulent passport on her, Suzie. She wasn't just planning on getting out of the country, she was planning on becoming a new person. Those two weren't going on a dream vacation, they were on the run from someone.”

“But who?” Suzie asked with growing confusion. She couldn't understand why Jason wasn't telling her about Dominic's arrest. She knew that he had been arrested. She had seen him on his knees in front of the police. “They were just an innocent loving couple when they showed up at Dune House. How could I have missed that they were in trouble?” she asked, doing her best to cover up what she knew.

“Suzie, I don't know who was looking for them but whoever was hunting them found them. I think that you and Mary should be safe there now, but you should still be careful. In fact, be extremely careful about who you talk to. If the wrong people get wind of you sniffing around, they might panic and think you know more than you do,” he spoke sternly.

“I'll be careful,” Suzie promised him. “But Jason there's got to be more to this story. I hate to see two people killed with no one facing justice for the crime,” she baited him, expecting him to confide that Dominic had been arrested for the crime.

“I'm on it, Suzie,” Jason assured her. “I'm not going to let this one go.”

“Jason, do you think her father might have had something to do with it?” Suzie asked as casually as she could. “He seems like the type to be involved in criminal activity, like murder.”

“Is there a type like that?” Jason asked with a hint of annoyance.

“You know what I mean, Jason,” Suzie said firmly. “Dangerous men don't get that reputation from shaking hands and kissing babies.”

“I get it,” Jason sighed. “All right, I guess I might as well tell you. I had strict orders not to tell anyone, because this is going to cause some serious media attention and all around drama, but I'm trusting you to keep this information to yourself, Suzie.”

“You can trust me, Jason,” Suzie said with relief. She was glad that his reluctance to share with her was only because of orders.

“We've just arrested Dominic Palov for the murder of his daughter, Daria Gable, and his son-in-law, Antony Gable,” Jason said with a hint of pride. “It didn't take us long to figure out who was responsible for their deaths. Now, we can wrap this whole thing up, but I doubt he'll be in jail for long. This man has more connections than most criminals I've dealt with before.”

“Are you sure it was him?” Suzie asked. “Couldn't it have been an enemy of his?”

“We found him practically standing over his daughter's dead body, Suzie,” Jason said. “I know it's hard to think of someone doing that to their own daughter, but the evidence is there. His fingerprints are all over the room they were staying in at Dune House and the warehouse where Daria was found. He was seen in the area at the time of the deaths. I found a motel room registered in his name, where the staff said he and his daughter had been staying. Then of course there is the fact that he was at the scene of the crime.”

“But why would he keep his daughter alive for so long, only to kill her?” Suzie asked. “If he killed Antony right away, then why did he wait so long to kill Daria?”

“I don't think I want to know,” Jason replied evenly. “A cruel man's mind, is a cruel man's mind, Suzie. I'd rather let the lawyers squabble over the whys, the important thing is he has been arrested for the crime.”

“No, that's not right,” Suzie said quickly and with growing frustration. “Dominic didn't do this,” she added before she could stop herself.

“Dominic?” Jason asked with an edge to his voice. “You're on first name basis with this murderer now?”

“No,” Suzie frowned. “I just know that he didn't do this.”

“Well, you're wrong,” Jason said sternly. “All of the evidence points directly to Dominic. He had motive, opportunity, and no alibi for the times of the murders.”

“But it doesn't make sense, does it?” Suzie pressed with urgency in her voice.

“Murder doesn't always make sense,” Jason said with a sigh. “In fact, in this case, it looks like it was the result of out of control rage. Dominic found out about Antony being involved with the Parish police department. So, he took his revenge. He must have assumed that Daria was involved as well and took her life.”

“He is her father,” Suzie breathed out. “It would have taken so much for him to kill her. Like I said, why keep her alive for so long? Have you even questioned him?”

“Playing the father card doesn't work in my mind,” Jason said in a darker tone. “I think my own experience with my father shows that not all parents always care that deeply about their children.”

“Jason, don't say that…” Suzie began to say.

“Suzie,” Jason said sharply. “The murderer is in custody, the case is closed. I don't know what you think might have happened, Suzie, but I have some loose ends I need to tie up for Summer.”

Suzie was relieved to hear that. She was sure that Summer had revealed the truth to Jason, which might explain why he was being so short about Dominic. Unfortunately, Suzie suspected that Jason's anger at Dominic for what he did to Summer, might be clouding his judgment. Then again, she had to admit, a part of her still wondered. Could Dominic have been putting on an act the entire time?

“All right, Jason, just keep me posted,” Suzie said softly. “I'm just asking that you consider the possibility that someone else might have been involved in this crime. Wouldn't you want to know if you have the wrong man in custody?”

“Well, if that turns out to be the case then I will make sure that you are first to know,” he said with a hint of sarcasm and forced politeness. “Now, if you don't mind, I've been working for two days straight, and I am looking forward to turning off my cell phone for a few hours.”

Suzie hung up the phone reluctantly. She could tell that there wasn't much chance of her changing Jason's mind. What she needed to figure out was how to prove that Dominic was not the killer.

“Was that Jason?” Mary asked when she brought their plates to the table.

“Yes,” Suzie nodded. “He was telling me about the arrest. They are considering the case closed.”

“Maybe it is,” Mary said with a frown. “Dominic is certainly capable of being the murderer.”

“Maybe so, but my instincts tell me he isn't,” Suzie said as she recalled his scream and his shocked look when he discovered her. “However, maybe my instincts are wrong. I noticed when he was talking with Summer he used reading glasses. I didn’t see Antony nor Daria wearing reading glasses. Remember the crushed glasses beside the car?”

“I do, but many people wear glasses,” Mary said slowly. “But you think he was at the scene of Antony’s murder. If they are his it certainly would be evidence that Dominic was the one who suffocated Antony. Maybe during the accident and murder Dominic stepped on his glasses.”

“Maybe,” Suzie nodded. “Or maybe Dominic was trying to protect Daria and Antony and he was the one driving and his glasses were knocked off in the accident. Maybe Baylor was there and he moved Antony into the driver's seat to cover up the suffocation. He might have assumed that the airbag would have been blamed for the bruising around Antony's mouth and nose,” she added thoughtfully.

“From what I read about him online Baylor is clever enough to do that,” Mary said with a shrug. “Unfortunately, Dominic is as well and I think he is going to have a hard time in court proving that it wasn’t him. That’s if it really wasn’t him.”

“I think we have a bigger problem,” Suzie said in a murmur.

“What's that?” Mary asked.

“While Dominic is in jail for two murders, I believe the true murderer, Baylor, is out and about walking free. I'm certain that if Baylor is the real murderer, he's going to be doing his best to hunt down anyone and everyone that could possibly connect him to the crime,” she shook her head. “Jason may think this is over, but I have a feeling it's not over yet.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15

Everything seemed quiet, almost normal, for about a half hour. Then there was a knock on the front door of Dune House. Suzie looked up from the dishes she had been washing. Mary stood up and put down the book she had been reading.

“Who do you think that could be?” Suzie asked with some concern. She was sure it wasn't Jason since he had said he was taking a few hours off. She was also fairly certain it wasn't Paul, as he wasn't supposed to arrive until later that night.

“Only one way to find out,” Mary said and walked towards the door. Suzie felt uneasy. She followed after Mary. Her mind kept traveling to the possibility that it could be Baylor.

“Detective Brown,” Mary said with a smile when she opened the door.

“Wes,” he reminded her firmly. “How are you, Mary?”

“I'm fine,” she replied. Suzie paused beside them.

“What brings you here, Wes?” Suzie asked as she studied the man.

“I wanted to let you know about Dominic's arrest,” Detective Brown explained. “I didn't want you to have to worry about whether you were safe or not.”

“Thanks,” Mary said with a small smile.

“Jason…” Suzie started to explain that Jason had already informed them, then she remembered his warning about not letting anyone know that he had told her. “Must be so happy,” she finished lamely.

“He is,” Detective Brown nodded. “He's a fine police officer, your cousin.”

“What about you?” Mary asked. “This must be a big win for you. You've been after Dominic for a long time.”

“That's true,” he nodded. “But to be honest I won't be celebrating until he's officially permanently behind bars. He's a slippery fellow, and he finds his way out of just about everything.”

“What about his partner, Bob Baylor?” Suzie asked. “Isn't anyone concerned about whether he might be involved?”

“It’s a possibility,” Detective Brown said thoughtfully. “I'm still on the lookout for him of course, but Dominic was always the brains of the team. I doubt Baylor can handle much on his own.”

Suzie wanted to argue with him, but she decided against it. She didn't want to explain her suspicions when she was fairly certain that he wouldn't be the least bit interested in them and they would just expose how much information she had managed to gain about the case.

“Well, thank you for coming all the way over here to tell us that,” Suzie said politely.

“Actually, I had more than one motive,” he said shyly.

“Oh?” Mary asked. Suzie braced herself, wondering if Detective Brown somehow knew that they had been at the crime scene earlier.

“It wasn't appropriate while there was still a murderer on the loose, considering that we're both involved in the case,” Detective Brown explained as he looked at Mary. “But now that Dominic is behind bars, I was hoping you might agree to spend a little time with me. On an unprofessional basis,” he stumbled over his final words.

Suzie's eyes widened. She was stunned to think that Detective Brown had a romantic interest in Mary. She hadn't picked up on it at all. She waited with a slightly amused smile for Mary to shoot him down in no uncertain terms. Mary might have been a romantic at heart, but she had shown no interest in dating anyone since her divorce. Suzie only hoped it wouldn't be too awkward for her when she turned Detective Brown down.

“That would be lovely,” Mary said softly, her voice wavering with a hint of shyness. Suzie's eyes widened even further. She looked from Mary, to Detective Brown, and then back to Mary again.

“Maybe we could take a walk along the beach, while there's still a little light left,” Mary suggested. “I mean if you have a little time now,” she rushed to say.

“For you, Mary, I have all the time in the world,” Detective

Brown replied and offered her his hand. Suzie was in such shock that she couldn't bring herself to speak.

“You don't mind, do you, Suzie?” Mary asked as she glanced over at her friend.

“Of course not,” Suzie replied, her mouth slightly dry. She wasn't sure what to make of this romantic connection, but there was one thing that she was certain of. After all that Mary had been through she deserved to have someone treat her well. If Mary wanted to see if that could be Detective Brown, she wasn't going to stand in her way.

Mary led Detective Brown through the side door and down the steps that led directly to the beach.

“I'm glad that you agreed to walk with me,” he said softly as they started off along the sand.

“I'm glad you asked,” Mary replied with a faint smile.

“I know that Suzie doesn't have a very high opinion of me,” Detective Brown admitted. “So, I wasn't sure how you would feel about me asking.”

“Suzie has her ways,” Mary explained. “She's used to being strong and determined. She's not used to being around other people who are strong and determined.”

Detective Brown chuckled a little. “Is that what you think I am? Strong and determined?”

“I think you take your job very seriously,” Mary replied. “I think you're looking for justice any way you can find it, and that you might hide your passion, but that doesn't mean that you don't feel it.”

“You seem to know me pretty well,” Detective Brown said with admiration. “Am I that easy to read?”

“No,” Mary laughed a little. “You just left me curious the last

time we met. I like it when I'm curious about someone."

"Are you still curious?" he asked as he paused beside the water.

"I am," Mary replied with warmth in her voice.

"I'd rather talk about you, Mary," Detective Brown said. "Tell me how you ended up in Garber."

"Suzie," Mary said fondly. "She inherited Dune House, and I needed a new life. She gave that to me."

"Why did you need a new life?" he asked as he studied her intently.

"Oh, you know," Mary smiled shyly. "Kids were grown, failed marriage, not much to do with my time," she lowered her voice as she added, "I'm terrible at knitting."

Detective Brown laughed at that. "Something tells me there's much more to the story," he said as his laughter died down.

"In the end it's just a story, isn't it?" Mary asked with a slight shrug. "How we feel about it, changes it."

"I guess I could agree with that," he nodded. "I haven't exactly had the best relationships myself."

"You?" Mary asked playfully. "A handsome detective like you, is single?"

"Very," he sighed. "I can't imagine why," he added with a spark in his tone. "I'm a real catch."

Mary giggled and touched his arm lightly. "I can see that."

Detective Brown smiled at the touch. "Seriously, sometimes my profession prevents me from being able to meet people, or have meaningful conversations."

"You mean about things other than crime?" Mary asked with a slight smile.

"About life," Detective Brown replied. "Life beyond the badge."

"I guess that would be hard," Mary said softly. "I've never really thought about how much being a detective or a police officer must bleed into every area of your life."

"It does," he nodded. "Sometimes it even blurs things."

"What do you mean?" Mary asked.

"Well, when you start out at the police academy, you know right from wrong. You're sure of it," he explained. "But as you get more involved in the lives of criminals, as you see what the streets are really like on a daily basis, that black and white imagery gets blurred. Like Antony," he said with a slight shrug. "I knew from the beginning that he was a criminal. Sure, he was pretty much forced

into it, but he was still a criminal. As I got to know him, I came to realize that he was also a smart, loyal, and hopeful young man. I guess you could say we almost became friends."

"I'm sorry," Mary said softly. "It must have been hard to lose him."

"It was," Detective Brown admitted. "No one will ever remember him the way I knew him. That's why, his death is something I take very personally."

Mary narrowed her eyes slightly as Detective Brown's tone began to change. She waited for him to continue.

"I need to know, Mary, what do you really know about Dominic Palov?"

Mary shook her head and laughed shortly. "I can't believe this."

"Believe what?" Detective Brown asked.

"I thought you asked me out here because you wanted to get to know me, because you liked me," Mary said with embarrassment. "But really you just wanted to get me away from Suzie so you could question me."

"I do want to get to know you but it's very important that you tell me what you know and Suzie seems to call the shots when you're together," Detective Brown pointed out. "I just wanted you to feel comfortable enough to speak freely."

"Huh," Mary shook her head and crossed her arms. "You really didn't have to go to all of this trouble. I would have told you if you had just asked me. Dominic confided in us that it was his business partner, Baylor that was holding Daria hostage. He warned us not to go to the police because he was afraid that Baylor would kill Daria if he found out."

"So, you formed an alliance with Dominic?" Detective Brown asked with some disgust.

"What is this an old war movie or something?" Mary countered. "No, we didn't form any alliance. We just wanted to protect Daria."

"You should have told someone," Detective Brown said with a slight shake of his head.

"I have now, haven't I?" Mary asked shortly. She turned on her heel and began walking back towards Dune House. "Thanks for the walk," she called back over her shoulder.

"Mary," Detective Brown said. He jogged through the sand a few feet to catch up with her. He grabbed her hand with his own. "Wait," he said, slightly out of breath.

“Why?” Mary asked sharply and tugged her hand out of his. “Do you have more questions for me?”

“No,” he paused a moment and met her eyes. “I just want you to know, I did ask you out here for a walk because I like you.”

Mary stared at him for a long moment, her eyes smoldering with emotion. Then she shook her head slightly.

“Good for you,” she said sharply, then she turned and stalked up the steps and into Dune House.

Suzie looked up when Mary slammed the side door closed.

“Are you okay?” she asked Mary with concern.

“Suzie, I swear, you got the last decent man on the face of the earth,” Mary fumed.

“So, I assume the walk did not go well,” Suzie said slowly as she watched Mary storm into the kitchen.

“Not well at all. He just wanted information from me,” she shook her head.

“Did you give it to him?” Suzie asked.

“Sure, why not? Dominic's in jail, Daria's already been killed, I told him about Dominic telling us that Baylor was holding her,” Mary sighed.

“Mary,” Suzie growled. “That wasn't a good idea!”

“What? Why?” Mary asked, clearly still annoyed.

“Because what if we can't trust him?” Suzie asked with exasperation.

“What do you mean?” Mary frowned.

“What if he tells Baylor we know that he was involved?” Suzie pressed. “Then Baylor is going to come looking for us.”

“I don't think Wes would do that,” Mary said thoughtfully. Then she recalled what Detective Brown had said about things being blurry. “I hope he won't,” Mary added.

“You're probably right,” Suzie sighed. “I'm just being paranoid. I'm sorry that he irritated you.”

“Me, too,” Mary agreed. “I guess I need to lay off the romance novels.”

“Don't do that,” Suzie insisted. “I wasn't looking for Paul, remember? Things just happened. In fact, I fought him every step of the way.”

“Good point,” Mary sighed. “Paul should be home soon, shouldn't he?”

“He usually comes in after dark,” Suzie replied with a small

smile of anticipation. She couldn't wait to tell him everything that had transpired.

Suddenly a strange noise could be heard from outside the kitchen.

“What is that sound?” Mary asked in a whisper as she moved closer to Suzie. It sounded like metal being jostled.

“I'm not sure,” Suzie admitted as she crept out of the kitchen and towards the side door beside the dining room. With the sun slowly beginning to set, it was not quite dark enough for the floodlights along the porch to turn on. The way the fading light reflected on the windows made it impossible to see much through the tall windows beside the door that led out to the porch and then to the beach.

“Do you think someone is out there?” Mary asked nervously. “I thought I saw a shadow.”

“I don't see anyone,” Suzie said grimly. “But that does sound like someone trying to break through the lock.”

“Oh no! Do you really think so?” Mary asked fearfully. “We should call the police,” she said quickly. “I'll call Jason,” Mary said and pulled out her phone. She dialed his number. “Suzie, he's not picking up, it's going straight to voicemail,” she said with growing panic in her voice.

“I know,” Suzie sighed as she recalled Jason's words. “He said he was going to turn his phone off for a few hours. He isn't going to know we’re calling.”

“So, let's call the police station,” Mary suggested. Before Suzie could nod in agreement the door that led out to the porch swung abruptly open.

A hooded man stepped into Dune House. He had his head lowered and his body was hunched over slightly.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16

Suzie and Mary stared at the hooded man in shock and they were both unable to speak for a second. Then Suzie found her voice.

“Who are you?” Suzie asked breathlessly. “We have a gun!”

“You don't have any gun,” the man replied with annoyance. He drew back his hood to reveal himself.

“Dominic,” Mary gasped. “What are you doing here?”

“Did you escape?” Suzie asked nervously. Maybe Jason had been right about him after all. She still couldn't be sure.

“No, I didn't escape,” he replied as his dark gaze swept over both of them. “I posted bail.”

“And you came here?” Mary asked fearfully. “We didn't tell the police anything.”

His lips pursed into a stern line as he studied them both. Slowly he shut the door behind him. The click of the door closing rattled Suzie to the core. She was beginning to think that she should have listened to Jason's warning. Dominic's dark eyes were locked on hers with such intensity that she could barely draw a breath.

“I know,” he said calmly. “Unfortunately, that nosy detective from Parish is obsessed with me,” he rubbed his wrists slowly, one at a time. “I could have done without the bracelets.”

“The question is, did you earn them?” Mary asked boldly. She was still remaining very close to Suzie.

Dominic quirked an eyebrow as he looked at Mary. “Would you like to explain that question to me?”

“Daria is dead. There's no sign of this business partner you accused,” Suzie frowned as she studied him. “We’re just wondering, did you think we were easy marks? Is that why you plied us with a sob story?”

Dominic looked between the two of them, obviously not pleased.

His hands settled at his sides casually, but his expression was becoming more virulent by the moment.

“What exactly are you accusing me of?” he asked and took a step closer to Suzie.

“Your business is important to you,” Suzie replied as calmly as she could. “If Antony was trying to get Daria to leave the business and possibly go to the police, that would put a lot of your clients at risk. Wouldn't it?” she pressed.

“Yes,” Dominic replied and continued to hold her gaze. “What's your point?”

“Her point is that when it comes to money, some people will go to great lengths to ensure that it continues to flow,” Mary said. She took a step slightly in front of Suzie, as if she was preparing to protect her.

Dominic's eyes flashed with a swift anger. His jaw rippled as he clenched his teeth. His hands tightened into fists at his sides. Suzie braced herself for what she expected to become a physical attack.

“You're asking me if I killed my own daughter?” he asked with disgust in his voice. “Who could ever do such a horrible thing?”

“Daria is dead,” Suzie said flatly, not giving him a chance to cover his emotions. “We know that Antony was trying to get out of the illegal business deals that you involved him in. Maybe Daria knew too much? Maybe she just betrayed you?”

“Unbelievable,” Dominic hissed and jabbed his finger close to Suzie's nose. “I would never harm a hair on my daughter's head. She was everything to me,” his voice caught in his throat. “I came here because I thought you both understood that.”

“Dominic, you didn't kill her, but you know where your partner is, don't you? Where is Baylor?” Mary asked in a tender voice.

Dominic lowered his hand. His eyes filled with tears as he looked towards the floor.

“I never expected her to be hurt. But, he knew me too well, and he knew that the only way to truly punish me was through hurting her. I thought maybe I would be able to save her.”

“Where is he?” Suzie pressed. “You know him as well as he knows you, where would he go?”

“Baylor has connections everywhere,” he muttered with hatred in his voice. “I don't care how far he's gone, no matter where he's gone, I will find him. I can't wait to find him. I want to hunt him down and kill him for taking my daughter from me.” Suzie could

see the rage in his expression as he scowled at her. “I never imagined that you would accuse me of taking her life. Daria was my princess, she still is, she always will be. I thought that you might have information about Baylor. I thought maybe your connection to the police might have netted you some insight into the investigation, beyond me as a suspect.”

“No, not at all. They're not looking for anyone else,” Mary said sadly. “There's so much evidence against you, I doubt they would even consider another suspect.”

“Exactly how Baylor would have planned it,” Dominic growled. Suzie was watching his every move, his every gesture. She was trying to decide whether or not she believed him. On one hand Jason was right, there was plenty of evidence against Dominic. On the other hand he truly did seem like a heartbroken father. They had also seen the articles about his public disputes with Baylor, so she knew that there was proof that they were at loggerheads.

“What I don't understand,” Suzie said grimly, “is if you two were partners, why would he go so far as to kill Daria? He didn't have to. He could have detained her. With Antony out of the picture, he didn't need to kill her. Why would he? What did she do?”

“It wasn't what she did,” Dominic frowned. “Not really. I tried warning her about Antony when she wanted to marry him. I told her that he was not like us. I grew up in a family that concealed and laundered money for the mob. She was raised the same way. Antony wasn't raised like this. His family followed the law strictly. I knew that eventually this business would wear on him. But she insisted that he would be loyal. Baylor was not happy about it. He tried to convince me to get rid of Antony before they could get married. But Daria was so happy,” he sighed. “I just couldn't do that to her. I wanted her to have a chance at real love. I had that with her mother, and I haven't had it again since. It's a rare and beautiful thing.”

Mary smiled faintly as she nodded. “That it is,” she said quietly. Suzie shot her a look. It didn't seem right for Mary to be sharing romantic ideals with a criminal.

“So, you let them marry,” Suzie said quietly. “But things went sideways with Antony as you expected.”

“When Baylor found out what Antony was threatening to do, he called me. He said I needed to take care of it, or he would. I knew what he meant, that I needed to kill Antony, or he was going to kill

them both," he grimaced and shook his head. "I was going to," he whispered.

"That's why you slipped into their room?" Suzie asked in a murmur. "You weren't going to help them escape. You were going to kill Antony."

"I thought I had to," Dominic admitted. "I thought it was what I had to do to protect my business, my partner, my daughter. But I couldn't do it. He'd become like a son to me. He treated my daughter like royalty. She was so excited to start a family with him. They were going to start trying to conceive," he shook his head and ruffled a hand through his hair. "I thought, if I could just get them started in a new country, they could have the lives they deserved. Our business could continue on, and everyone would be fine."

"But that's not what your partner had in mind," Suzie said softly.

"If I had known that Antony was really going to go to the police, I would have been more cautious. He convinced me that he was loyal to me, our family, he just wanted out of the business."

"But he wasn't loyal," Suzie supplied. "He betrayed you."

"He was going to go to the police," Dominic explained. "He thought he was being so smart about things. Baylor was already suspicious about him. He thought the visit to Garber was a cover up for meeting with a detective and maybe even the FBI, away from prying eyes. So he followed them here. Then he called me and told me that he had proof. He was furious, whatever had happened made him snap"

"Maybe he overheard Antony and Daria arguing about going to the police," Suzie sighed.

"Maybe," Dominic nodded. "I knew that I had to get them out of the country as fast as possible. So, that night I got one of my men to drop me at the bed and breakfast. I woke them up in the middle of the night, I even got them new passports so that they would be traveling under new names. We didn't have a lot of time, I wrote the note to cover their departure, and we took off. I took the back road, hoping no one would notice the headlights, but Baylor knew. He must have been watching. He ran us off the road. When the car hit the tree, I got Daria out, but Antony was too injured to get out. I had to drag Daria away from him screaming. We took off into the woods."

"Baylor must have finished Antony off by suffocating him," Suzie said with disgust. "He couldn't even give him the chance to

survive."

"Baylor is a hard man," Dominic murmured. "He does not take betrayal lightly. I knew that he would be hunting for Daria and me. So, I put her in a motel room, I thought she would be safe, but he found her and moved her to his warehouse," his voice broke. "Now, my little girl is dead because of me. If I had been brave enough to do what needed to be done, she would be alive."

"But she never would have forgiven you for killing Antony," Mary said softly.

"I never killed him and even if she did blame me at least she would be alive," Dominic shook his head. "I might as well go to jail for her death, it seems fitting. But I wanted to warn you both about Baylor. I'm sure he's not going to risk leaving any potential witnesses behind."

"Listen Dominic, let me call my cousin, if you tell him everything that you just told me, I'm sure he'll do his best to help you…" Suzie began to plead.

"No," Dominic said firmly. "I don't want to deal with the police anymore. To be honest, I don't want to fight either. With Daria gone, there's nothing to fight for."

Suzie heard the click of the front door opening, and looked up sharply. A man in a fine business suit and a brimmed hat pulled low over his forehead stood in front of the door.

"Can I help you, Sir?" Suzie asked and took a step towards him.

"I think you can," the man replied and moved closer to the three of them.

"Baylor," Dominic breathed out and reached for something tucked into the back of his trousers.

"Don't even think about it," Baylor growled and drew his own gun. He had it aimed at Dominic, but he was glaring equally at Mary and Suzie. "You two, up against the wall," he instructed and gestured towards the wall opposite the front desk. Suzie grabbed Mary's hand and tugged her over to the wall. Her heart was pounding.

"What are we going to do?" Mary hissed.

"Quiet!" Baylor demanded. Then he turned back to Dominic. "On your knees," he instructed.

Dominic reluctantly lowered himself to his knees. Baylor snatched the gun from the back of Dominic's pants. He tucked it into his own pocket and scowled down at Dominic.

“You don't have to do this, Baylor,” Dominic said quietly. “You've already taken everything from me. There's no reason to hurt these ladies.”

“That's for me to decide,” he snapped in return. “When we first started out, I thought we were brothers,” Baylor said as he settled his gaze on Dominic. “I thought that we had been through enough together to consider each other family. I should have known better. You will never consider me to be family, will you Dominic?” he asked as he paused a few feet in front of Dominic.

“What did you do?” Dominic gasped out. “How could you kill my Daria? She grew up calling you uncle,” he exclaimed with anguish.

“Did I kill her?” Baylor licked his lips slowly and then shrugged. “Not really. I mean technically, yes, I did. But it was you who truly killed her, wasn't it Dominic?” he smiled faintly at the man.

Mary clung tightly to Suzie's hand. Suzie could feel the sweat gathering between their palms. Suzie’s heart was pounding as fear coursed through her.

“Yes,” Dominic exhaled the word. “Yes it was.”

“I asked you to do one thing for me, didn't I?” Baylor continued. “All I asked you to do was get rid of Antony. We both knew that it had to be done.”

“I know,” Dominic whispered, his head hanging low. “But she was so happy with him…”

“That's your mistake,” Baylor snapped sharply. “Men like us, don't get the luxury of happy, Dominic. Now, I want to know every contact for the business. You're going to make some calls for me tonight, before we finish up our business.”

Suzie knew that Baylor had no intention of letting any of them go. She felt as if she had to do something. She could see the gun in Baylor's pocket as he stood with his back to them, interrogating Dominic.

“Don't,” Mary breathed when she saw Suzie inch forward. Suzie ignored the warning. She knew it was their only chance. She just about had her hand around the butt of the gun, when Baylor suddenly spun around to face her.

“You think you're so smart, don't you?” he growled. He grabbed the handle of the closet door beside the two women and jerked it open. “Get inside!” he demanded and pointed with his gun.

Suzie looked apologetically at Mary, then the two stepped inside

the closet. Baylor shut the door firmly. Suzie heard it lock from the outside.

“Great,” Mary breathed out tensely.

“Jason has no idea we're here with Baylor and Dominic,” Suzie whispered to Mary. “He has no reason to come looking for us. He thinks he already has the person responsible for both murders in custody. With his phone off he probably doesn’t even know that Dominic posted bail.”

“Please, tell me some good news,” Mary said as she cringed. She pressed her ear against the door of the closet. “I can hear them arguing.”

“Baylor is not going to leave us here alive,” Suzie said grimly. “I hate to be blunt, Mary, but it's the truth. We can point at him for Antony and Daria's murder. I'm sure it won't be long before he is responsible for Dominic's murder as well. We have to find a way to get out of here, and fast.”

“But how?” Mary shook her head. “It's not like we can dig a tunnel.”

“I know that,” Suzie admitted with a frown. “But we have to try to think of a way to escape. No one is going to come and rescue us.”

“You're right,” Mary agreed and closed her eyes briefly. “We might not have much time either, from the way they are shouting.”

Outside the closet door Suzie could hear Dominic's voice raising with every word he spoke.

“Do you think I care if you kill me now?” he was demanding. “You took Daria from me, my only child. I have no reason to live any longer.”

“I will ease your grief soon, my brother,” Baylor assured him. “But first I need you to call all of our clients and give them your blessing to transfer their accounts fully to me.”

“I'm not going to do that,” Dominic said darkly.

There was silence for a long moment, then someone cleared their throat.

“Fine, then which should I kill first, the blonde or the redhead?” he asked in an eerily calm tone.

“You think threatening to kill them is going to get me to comply?” Dominic asked incredulously. “I don't even know them. Why would I care if you kill them?”

“You shouldn't,” Baylor replied with a slight chuckle. “But if there's one thing I've learned about you, Dominic, it's that you're

softer than you look. All those times that we should have just killed a troublemaker you always found an excuse not to do it. At first I thought you were just that clever, but now I know, it's because you're soft. You've never really been your father's son, have you Dominic?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dominic growled.

"Fine, then I'll start with the blonde," Baylor replied and his voice drew closer to the closet door.

"Suzie," Mary gasped and tried to push Suzie behind her. The coats and extra curtains that were stored in the closet would not be enough to hide either of them.

"Like I said," Dominic growled. "I'm not making any of those calls."

"Fine, then you can watch them suffer and die, one by one," Baylor shot back. Suddenly the door to the closet was jerked open. Mary stood boldly in front of Suzie in an attempt to protect her.

"Get out here," Baylor said sharply and tried to shove Mary out of the way. Suzie felt around in the closet desperately. She was hoping to find anything that she could use to defend them both against Baylor. When her fingertips grazed across a hook on the wall, she gave it a tug, hoping that it would pull free and she would be able to use it to strike out at Baylor. Instead of it detaching, it tilted. When it tilted, she heard a soft creak from behind her.

"Mary," Suzie hissed and wrapped an arm around her waist. She pulled her close and held tightly to her.

"Wait," Dominic said morosely. "Wait, I'll make the calls," he mumbled.

Suzie didn't have time to be grateful for Dominic's concession, before the closet door was slammed shut once more.

"That's better," Baylor said, his voice victorious.

"Mary, quick," Suzie hissed as soon as the door was closed. "I think there's something back here."

Although she and Mary had done many renovations on the house there were still areas that were a mystery to them. Suzie ran her fingers along the back wall of the closet. As she had suspected she found a crack in the paneling. She curled her fingers into the crack and tugged on it. The entire wall began to slide into the closet.

"Suzie, what is happening?" Mary asked anxiously.

"Shh," Suzie warned her. Suzie had nothing to shed light into

the dark passage behind the wall. She had no way of knowing where it went, or how far it went. But one thing she did know was that on the outside of the closet door, a killer was waiting to kill them.

“Let's find out where this goes,” Suzie said, trying to sound brave. She pulled Mary into the passage with her. The space was just wide enough for them to fit side by side flat against the interior wall. From what she could tell, she couldn't move any further.

“I'm not playing any more games with you,” Baylor shouted. “If you're not going to keep your word, then one of them dies right now!”

Suzie didn't have much time to explore, because the closet door jerked open again.

“Where are they?” Baylor suddenly barked as he stuck his head into the closet. “This is impossible!”

He shoved his hands through the coats and curtains searching for the two women. He pushed enough that the wall slid silently back into place. Suzie tried not to panic as she realized that she and Mary were trapped in the tiny space. She had never been fond of small spaces.

“Mary, try not to panic,” Suzie whispered. “I'm not sure how to get the door back open.”

“I'm not going to panic, I'm not going to panic,” Mary said to herself along with a few deep breaths. Suzie hoped she could keep control of herself as well. She tried not to think about the insects that had to be crawling around, or the possibility that Baylor could just get frustrated and open fire at the closet. The thin wall wasn't going to serve as much protection. Suzie wriggled a little further along in the small space. She saw a pinch of light. She moved towards it. Soon she realized it was a crack in the wall. She could see right out into the dining room area, where Baylor and Dominic were still arguing.

“I can see them,” Suzie whispered to Mary. Mary was still taking slow, deep breaths.

Suzie pressed her eye against the small crack in the wall. She could see Dominic on his knees in front of Baylor, who was aiming his gun at Dominic. She braced herself for the sound of the gun.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17

The next thing that Suzie heard was not a gun firing it was the front door of Dune House swinging open. A moment later, she heard a voice call out.

“Suzie? Mary? Are you home?” but the voice was coming from the side entrance of Dune House, not the front.

There was a flurry of movement as Baylor spun and pointed his gun at the front door, and then at the side door.

“What's going on here?” a voice that Suzie recognized as Paul's demanded.

“Oh no,” she breathed to Mary. “Paul just walked in.”

“Stay back, Paul,” a voice that Suzie recognized as Jason's commanded.

“Jason's here, too,” she grimaced. Then a third, powerful voice spoke up.

“Drop your weapon and get back against the wall right now!”

“That's Wes,” Mary said with a slight gasp. Suzie and Mary waited tensely to see what would happen next. Suzie's heart was racing as she hoped that Paul would not get hurt in the middle of everything. She was sure that Jason and Detective Brown would have their weapons on them, but Paul didn't carry any kind of weapon aside from perhaps a fishing knife.

“Put down the gun, Baylor,” Detective Brown instructed. “It's all over now.”

“You're surrounded,” Jason added.

“What have you done with Suzie and Mary?” Paul growled.

“I'm not going to jail,” Baylor argued. “If you take one step closer I'll start shooting.”

“No!” Mary gasped.

“Shh,” Suzie warned. “If they hear us in here it might distract

them."

What seemed like a century later, but must have only been a few seconds, they heard a gunshot outside the closet door. The gunshot was followed by a scuffle, and loud voices.

"Drop the weapon!" Detective Brown commanded.

"Put your hands on your head," Jason shouted.

"Where are they?" Paul questioned. The sound of Paul's voice made Suzie's heart stop for a moment. Paul was safe.

"Now, can we panic?" Mary whispered.

"Yes," Suzie nodded. She began pounding on the wall in front of her. She wasn't sure if anyone would be able to hear her. Mary joined in with the pounding.

"What is that?" Suzie heard Detective Brown ask.

"We're in here!" Suzie shouted.

"We're behind the closet!" Mary shouted as loudly as she could. But even to their ears their voices sounded very muffled.

"Are they in the wall?" Paul asked incredulously.

The closet door was jerked open.

"I know where they are," Jason said quickly. "Listen to me, Suzie, Mary, I'm going to get you out of there," he promised them. She heard him knocking lightly along the wall. Then she heard the wall creak slightly. He tugged at the wall until it opened into the closet. Mary was the first to rush out, followed by Suzie. Both were desperate to get into a larger space.

"It's okay," Jason promised them. "You're safe," he stepped back so they could step out of the closet. Suzie saw Bob Baylor in handcuffs and Dominic sprawled out on the floor with Detective Brown beside him tending to a gunshot wound. Paul was right beside Baylor, making sure that he didn't move.

"What are you all doing here?" Suzie asked in a daze. She was more than happy to see them, but their presence all at once didn't make sense to her.

"I heard about Dominic being released, so I wanted to warn you," Jason said as he glanced over his shoulder at the front door. "It was locked, but I had the key."

"I trailed Bob Baylor here," Detective Brown explained

"I came straight here as soon as I docked," Paul frowned as he studied Suzie's pale face. "I wanted to surprise you."

"It was a great surprise," Suzie said with relief. She tried not to look in Baylor's direction. "Is Dominic going to be okay?" she asked.

“He should be,” Detective Brown said as he looked up. “It's just a shot to the arm.”

Mary leaned back against the wall and tried to calm down.

“Not every woman gets three heroes,” she said with a slight laugh.

“Not every woman gets stuck inside a wall,” Suzie pointed out. “Jason, how did you know?”

“You forget, I grew up in this house,” Jason said with a smile. “I know this house's secrets. I used to hide in there whenever it was time for me to go to the dentist. It's an extra storage space behind the closet.”

“It's scary is what it is,” Mary grumbled.

“We're lucky it was there,” Suzie shook her head. “Baylor was about to kill us both.”

Baylor glared up at her from where he was on his knees on the floor. Paul smacked him hard in the back of the head.

“Don't you even look at them,” he warned sharply.

“Paul!” Detective Brown and Jason warned him at the same time.

“You two forget,” Paul growled. “I'm not wearing a badge.”

“Just cool it,” Jason said sternly. “We don't need him to get out of the arrest on a technicality.”

As he spoke paramedics arrived to take care of Dominic. He opened his eyes slightly and looked up at Suzie and Mary.

“Thank you for trying to help,” he mumbled, before the paramedics shushed him.

“He tried to protect us,” Suzie said softly as Detective Brown walked over to them.

“I know,” he said quietly. “I began looking into Baylor's involvement when I found out he had been seen in Garber at the same time as Dominic. That's when I began to think he was the one involved in the deaths, not Dominic. That's why I asked you about Dominic on our walk, Mary,” he added softly.

“What's going to happen to him?” Mary asked.

“I can't say just yet,” Detective Brown said. “But I'll make sure that he has a fair chance,” he reached out and gently took Mary's hand. “Are you hurt?” he asked in a murmur.

“I don't think so,” Mary replied as she stared at him for a long moment. Neither made a move to let go of the other’s hand. Suzie was too distracted by Paul embracing her to notice.

“I think from now on, I'm taking you out on the boat with me,” he mumbled beside her ear. “I've got to keep my eye on you.”

Suzie laughed softly as she hugged him close. “That doesn't sound like a bad idea.”

“I'm sorry I wasn't here earlier,” Paul murmured.

“All that matters is that you're here now, Paul,” Suzie replied. She gave him a quick, soft kiss.

Soon, Dune House was overrun by police officers. Suzie felt a little overwhelmed by all of the weapons and badges around her. She stepped out onto the porch alone and gazed out over the dark water. She wanted to have as much space around her as possible. The door behind her opened, and Jason stepped out onto the wooden porch.

“Are you doing all right?” Jason asked as he studied her from a short distance.

“I'm a little shaken up,” she admitted without looking away from the water. “If you three hadn't shown up when you did…”

“But we did,” Jason reminded her. “I'm sorry I didn't listen to you in the first place.”

“I hadn't given you a whole lot of reason to trust me,” Suzie replied with a sigh.

“Well, everything is going to be fine, now,” he promised her. “Dominic is on his way to the hospital, and they think he will be fine. Lucky for us Baylor panicked when we surrounded him, so he misfired and only struck Dominic's shoulder. Dominic has already agreed to testify against Bob Baylor, and several of his clients. His business will be completely shut down. It won't bring his daughter back though,” he shrugged a little.

“What about Summer?” Suzie asked with some concern. “He's not going to include her, is he?”

Jason stared hard at her for a moment. “You knew about that too, hmm?” he asked with a frown. “Why does it seem like I'm the last one to know things around here?”

“She was just taking care of her family, Jason,” Suzie explained.

“I know. Don't worry, he's going to keep Summer and her family's name out of it,” Jason said softly. “I made sure of that.”

“Jason, I'm sorry I didn't tell you everything,” Suzie frowned and finally turned to face him.

“You were in a tough position, I know that now,” Jason said. “If you thought there was any chance that Daria could be saved, I

understand why you didn't come to me. I just hope that you know that you always can."

"I do," Suzie smiled fondly. "I'm very glad I can."

"Good," he nodded. "Now, I'm beat. I'm going see Summer and then head home. Besides, I think you have someone waiting for you," he tilted his head towards Paul who had just finished his interview with Kirk.

"Get some rest, Jason," Suzie said as she gave him a quick hug.

"You too, Suzie," he said sternly. "Tomorrow, we'll get together, and I'll tell you some stories about that passage."

"I'm sure they are stories that I'd like to hear," Suzie laughed a little. Jason nodded and walked over to a few other officers to make sure that everything was getting wrapped up.

Suzie watched Paul for a long moment. It amazed her that he had no idea she was in danger, and yet when she had needed him, he was there. When she walked over to Paul, he turned towards her with warmth in his eyes and his arms already open. He embraced her, his strong grasp soothing to Suzie as she was still trembling from the confrontation. She sighed against his chest and reveled in his warmth.

"It's okay now," he murmured beside her ear. "It's all over now."

Suzie had never felt so secure before. She was used to fighting her own battles, but she had to admit that having someone else to lean on for comfort was very soothing.

"I'm so glad that you came home," she said in a whisper.

"So am I," he replied and nuzzled her cheek. "I just wish I had gotten here a little sooner, maybe then you and Mary wouldn't have been in such a terrible position."

"It was my fault," Mary sighed as she walked over to the two of them. "I thought we could trust Dominic."

"So did I, and we weren't wrong," Suzie pointed out. "He didn't kill his daughter. It was Baylor that did that. Maybe without Baylor in his life, Dominic could have been an entirely different person."

"I guess it's possible, but with his family history I doubt it," Mary nodded. "And getting involved with him sure put us in a bad position."

Detective Brown made his way over to the trio. He nodded to Paul, to Suzie, and smiled warmly at Mary.

"Quite an adventurous evening," he said. "The important thing is that you both made it out safely," Detective Brown said with a

sigh of relief. “Things could have gone very differently.”

“They would have, if it weren't for our heroes,” Mary said and gave Detective Brown's hand a light squeeze.

Detective Brown blushed a little. “Just doing my job,” he said quietly.

“You didn't have to look out for us,” Mary pointed out. “You went the extra mile to make sure that we were safe.”

“I just wanted to make sure no one got hurt,” Detective Brown explained. “I'd hate to see such a lovely, kind woman as yourself get mixed up in such a dangerous situation.”

“Oh, well, thank you,” Mary said, obviously flustered.

Suzie raised an eyebrow and winked at Paul. Paul pursed his lips and then smiled.

“Detective Brown, perhaps you could join us for a celebratory dinner tomorrow?” Suzie suggested. “At least now we know that Antony and Daria's killer will be behind bars.”

“I'd like that,” Detective Brown agreed. “But it's Wes, call me Wes.”

“Wonderful, Wes,” Mary said. “We can meet at Dune House if you'd like.”

“I would,” he nodded. “Maybe we could take another shot at that walk on the beach?” he suggested. “It always helps to calm my nerves.”

“Mine too,” Mary admitted.

As the two walked off together, Suzie felt her protective instinct kick in. She wasn't sure if she trusted Detective Brown. She wasn't sure if he was the right man for Mary to be interested in. Like a big sister, she wanted to shield Mary from any more hurt. She tensed in Paul's arms.

“Shh,” Paul murmured with a faint chuckle. “I can see your mind whirling.”

“Can you?” Suzie asked and met his eyes.

“Sometimes, my sweet Suzie, things have to slow down,” he murmured.

“But that seems impossible when my mind is going a million miles a minute,” she sighed.

“I can help you with that,” he assured her. Suzie looked at him skeptically, but in the next moment his velvety lips were pressed against hers. She melted into the kiss, and her mind slowed until the only thing she could think of was his arms around her. When

she surfaced from the kiss, her first instinct was to look for Mary. She found her in a patch of moonlight that was playing along the sand. She was wrapped up in Detective Brown's arms, her lips lightly caressing his. Her auburn hair streaked with silver was drifting back from her neck, catching the moonlight perfectly. With the sea sprawled out beside them, Suzie was struck by how the scene looked exactly like the cover of a romance novel. But Mary would never know that. She would never need to. She didn't need to see a picture on a cover of a book, when she was living out the story.

Suzie closed her eyes and rested comfortably in Paul's arms. She was starting to think the life of a fisherman might be a little less eventful than the life of a bed and breakfast owner and operator.

The End

OceanofPDF.com

SUSPECTS AND SURPRISES

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 6

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

Dune House was still. It was very quiet. So quiet that Suzie was sure her footsteps were excessively loud. With the phone in her hand Suzie crept around the corner of the hallway and into the dining room which overlooked the beach. She pressed the phone close to her ear.

“Ma'am, ma'am, are you still there?” a woman's voice was asking.

“Yes, I'm here,” Suzie replied in a whisper.

Suzie curved the phone close to her lips. She whispered again into the receiver. “I just want to confirm the flights I reserved,” she explained.

“Excuse me, ma'am?” the voice on the other side of the phone asked. “Can you speak up a little?”

“No, I can't,” Suzie said with a hiss. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure that Mary hadn't stepped inside. She noticed Mary and Detective Wes Brown walking along the beach, hand in hand, she breathed in slightly. “Okay,” Suzie said with a sigh of relief. “Sorry about that, it's a surprise,” she explained.

“Okay,” the woman on the other end of the phone said with a hint of annoyance. “So, what can I do for you?”

“I just want to confirm the flights for two passengers,” Suzie explained. She lowered her voice once more and spoke the names of the passengers. She was doing everything she could to keep this surprise a secret.

“Yes, the flights are reserved and paid in full,” the woman replied politely.

“Wonderful, thank you,” Suzie said before hanging up the phone. She was so excited at the thought of seeing Mary's children, and she knew that Mary would be as well. With them both being in

college, she wasn't expecting anything special for her birthday. After all Mary had been through with her difficult marriage, Suzie wanted Mary's first birthday as a free woman to be a great celebration. A few minutes later the side door that led to the beach swung open, and Mary stepped inside. Suzie smiled when she saw her.

“How are you this morning?” she asked.

“I'd rather not say,” Mary replied sullenly and walked into the kitchen.

“Mary?” Suzie asked as she followed after her. Mary was usually always cheerful. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” Mary sighed and started a pot of coffee.

“You don't seem fine,” Suzie pointed out. Then she paused a moment. She remembered how depressed she would get around her birthdays. Suzie didn’t like growing old, and she could understand that Mary might be a little down about turning another year older. “Is it your birthday?” she asked. “You know that you’re only as old as you feel. You’re still beautiful, and you will be beautiful for years to come.”

“Thank you,” Mary said with a small smile. “But that's not it,” she shook her head. “I've never dreaded getting older. Now, especially when I have the chance to start my life over.”

“Then what is it?” Suzie asked with concern. “I know something is wrong, Mary. You know that you can't hide it from me.”

“I know,” Mary smiled fondly at Suzie. “I never have been able to.”

“So, out with it,” Suzie demanded. “What's going on?”

“It's Wes,” she explained hesitantly. “I know that things are different now, than they were when I was dating so long ago. But he just seems distant lately. He's always taking these phone calls. Even now when we were walking, he stopped to talk. He always makes sure I can't hear him when he does,” she sighed. “I guess I thought my second chance at romance, was going to be real romance. You know the kind that sweeps you off your feet. A man who stares deeply into your eyes, and whispers in your ear, not into his cell phone.”

“I'm sorry, Mary,” Suzie said softly. “Maybe he's working on a case,” she suggested. “You know they have to be pretty private about that.”

“I don't think so,” Mary frowned. “I asked him if he had been

busy at work, and he said that it had been very slow."

"Well, I'm sure there's an explanation," Suzie insisted. "Wes is a good guy, I don't think he would be stringing you along."

"So, what if he's not?" Mary shook her head. "Then he's just bored with me?"

"Who could be bored with someone like you?"

"Maybe I'm just expecting too much," Mary muttered and finished her coffee.

"Maybe we just need to have some time out of this house," Suzie suggested. "We haven't been to the library in some time. I have some books to take back, do you want to keep me company?"

"I'd love that," Mary agreed with a small sigh. "Maybe I just need a new perspective on things."

Suzie nodded and patted her hand lightly. As they headed out to the library she kept her eye out for any sign of Detective Brown lurking around the property. She knew that Mary had some of the best instincts she had ever known, and Suzie was highly protective of her. As they drove towards the library, Mary had a vague look of sadness.

"Mary, cheer up, it's your birthday soon," Suzie said. She turned the car onto the main street of town.

"I know," Mary sighed. "I'm sure we'll have fun. I guess it's these times of the year that make me feel a little left behind."

"You're not left behind," Suzie argued. "You're running your own business…"

"Your business," Mary pointed out.

"Our business," Suzie said firmly. "You know the bed and breakfast wouldn't exist without you, Mary. Don't you?" she glanced over to meet her friend's eyes.

"I guess," Mary replied. "Don't get me wrong, I love Dune House, it's just a transitional time for me."

"I understand," Suzie said. She wished she did. Mary's life had always been so different from her own, and yet they had always been able to connect, even when Suzie was off in some foreign country chasing down a story and Mary was debating cloth or disposable diapers. They were more than friends, they were sisters, even if they didn't share blood. "But this could be a good transition," Suzie pointed out. "You get to choose what comes next."

"I thought I would love that," Mary laughed. "It's a lot harder

than I expected it to be."

"You'll figure it out," Suzie said with confidence. "I know it's just words, but I know that you will find your way."

"I appreciate that," Mary said and nudged her arm lightly. "If I get lost, at least I'll have you to snap me out of it."

"Oh, I will," Suzie chuckled. "Trust me, I will."

The parking lot of the library was mostly empty. It wasn't the most popular place in the seaside tourist town. The local museum and wide variety of restaurants were much more popular. For that reason it was fairly small. But because of the head librarian, it had one of the best collections of books. Suzie had yet to find anything she couldn't get at the library. She held the door open for Mary as they walked inside. Suzie knew that something was up when she walked into the library. Louis usually had his nose buried in a book, but today he was pacing back and forth. He had a glow in his cheeks. His eyes were shining behind his glasses.

"Hi Louis," Suzie said as she walked up to the desk. Mary offered him a friendly smile.

"Hello ladies," Louis said with a wide grin. "I'm so glad that you're here. I have some amazing news."

"What is it?" Suzie asked, her own excitement building.

"A few months ago a mentor of mine passed away. He and I were good friends in college," he explained.

"How is that good news?" Mary asked with surprise.

"That's not the good news," Louis said sharply. "They finally got his estate straightened out. I had no idea he intended to leave me anything. But he did. I might as well have won the lottery!"

"That much money?" Suzie asked, her eyes wide. "What a windfall!"

"Oh, it is quite a windfall, but it isn't money," Louis smiled. "It's

a book."

"A book?" Mary shook her head. "You're this happy about a book?"

"It's not just any book," he sighed. "It's a rare antique book, one of a kind. Collectors all over the world fight over the chance to get their hands on this book, and Richard left it to me," he said proudly.

"Congratulations, Louis," Mary said warmly. "That really is a treasure."

"It isn't just the book," Louis admitted. "It's that Richard chose me to give it to. I didn't see him for a few months before he died. I tried to visit him, but his family kept him very secluded. It means the world to me that he thought enough of me that he wanted me to have the book."

"I'm very happy for you, Louis," Suzie said. "I'd love to have the chance to see it sometime."

"That would be lovely," Mary agreed.

Louis stared at them both for a long moment. Then he nodded shortly. He gestured for them both to follow him. Mary and Suzie exchanged confused looks, but they followed after Louis. Louis paused beside the employees' only door, and looked back at them both.

"Now, this is completely against the rules. I'm trusting you both not to get me into any trouble," he raised an eyebrow as he looked at them.

"No trouble," Suzie promised.

"Quiet as mice," Mary added with a genuine smile.

"Okay," he sighed and opened the door. Suzie swept her gaze over the large office that they walked into. It was set up more as a living room than an office, with overstuffed furniture as well as many coffee tables. There were piles of books all over the room. On one table, there was a large wooden box.

"Nice place," Suzie said with a smile. "I had no idea all of this was in here."

"It's a retreat," Louis explained. "Just a place where the staff can go to enjoy a book."

"What's this?" Mary asked as she peered at the box.

"Careful," Louis warned. "That's where the book is."

Mary and Suzie raised eyebrows at each other. Suzie thought it was quite a lot of trouble to go to for a book.

Louis carefully lifted the lid of the box. Then he picked up some rubber gloves and slid them on his hands. He reached inside the box and cautiously lifted the book out of the box. Suzie didn't know what to expect, but with all of the fanfare she was thinking it might be jewel encrusted or carved from marble. Instead it was a simple leather bound book that could have been on any shelf. It appeared to be old, but it didn't appear to be special.

“Isn't it beautiful?” Louis asked as he peered at it through his thick glasses.

“It is,” Mary replied wistfully.

Suzie smiled and nodded. She didn't see what the big deal was, but if Louis loved it so much, it mattered to her that it was important to him.

“It's a collection of poems,” he explained. “To be honest I'm not that fond of poetry, but this book has been passed down through generations of families and is one of the oldest books to be in such excellent condition.”

“Amazing,” Mary sighed.

“It looks like leather,” Suzie said and reached out to touch the cover. Louis smacked her hand away before she could touch it.

“Ouch!” Suzie murmured.

“I'm so sorry,” Louis said quickly and set the book back down in the box. “It's just that the oils from your skin might cause damage to the book.”

“Well, then I'm sorry, too,” Suzie said. She was still a little annoyed, but she realized her mistake.

“It's not insured yet,” he explained. “That's another reason why I have to be so careful with it. I tried to get it insured based on the information that came with it, but the agency insisted that one of their valuers had to inspect it.”

“Make sure you keep it safe until then,” Mary said with a smile.

“I plan to, I am taking it home with me today and I actually have a valuer coming out to see the book. It is such a long drive for him to come all the way out here,” Louis explained. “I agreed to arrange accommodation for him so I was hoping maybe he could stay at Dune House for the night,” he glanced between the two of them.

“Of course,” Suzie nodded. “It's no problem at all.”

“Great!” Louis said with excitement. “I bet he will love Dune House. With his eye for detail and history I'm sure he will.”

“We'll get a room ready for him,” Mary offered. “Congratulations, Louis, on receiving such a treasure.”

“I can barely believe it myself,” Louis shook his head. “When I said goodbye to Richard, I never thought I'd be receiving this book from him. It was hard to lose him, but he'd been sick for so long,” he frowned as he swept his gaze over the book. “I guess even more than the historical value of this book, is the sentimental value. A valuer can't put a price on that, can he?”

“No, I don't think so,” Suzie said warmly. “It's nice to have something that will remind you of your friend.”

“Yes, it is,” Louis said with a smile. “Thanks again. The valuer's name is Warren Blasser. He should be arriving around six tonight.”

“Great,” Suzie nodded. “We'll be ready for him.”

As Suzie and Mary walked out of the library, Suzie caught sight of Jason's patrol car rolling down the main street. She lifted her hand and waved to him. He flashed his lights back at her.

“He just loves playing with those lights,” Suzie laughed and shook her head.

“I would, too,” Mary grinned. “And the siren.”

“Wouldn't it be so much fun to take it for a spin around town?” Suzie suggested. “I'm sure Jason wouldn't mind.”

“I'm sure he would,” Mary burst out laughing. “But he'd have a hard time catching us without his car.”

“Let's do it,” Suzie said mischievously. “What's the worst that could happen?”

“We could be arrested by your young cousin and miss the chance to host Warren Blasser,” Mary pointed out.

“Oh Mary,” Suzie sighed with disappointment. “You're always so reasonable.”

“Someone has to be,” Mary said teasingly. “You've been getting me into trouble since high school.”

Suzie offered an innocent smile as they settled into her car.

“Sometimes it's fun to do something completely unexpected,” Suzie pointed out as she started the car.

“Yes, like ice cream for breakfast, or swimming at midnight, but not stealing a cop car, Suzie, really?” she raised an eyebrow. “What's brought on this daring behavior?”

“I don't know,” Suzie said grimly. “I guess that I've been feeling a little restless. With the renovations complete on Dune House and tourist season behind us, sometimes I feel like I'm dusting the same

furniture over and over again."

"That's because you are," Mary grinned. "But the rest of the furniture could use a dusting, too, you know."

"Ha," Suzie smiled at her friend. "I mean, it's great when Paul is here, but he ships out tomorrow for a few days. I feel like while he's gone I have nothing to do with myself."

"Well, since Wes seems to be otherwise occupied, we can always do something fun together," Mary suggested. As she spoke her cell phone began to ring. She smirked as she looked at the name on the phone. "I guess he really is a good detective," she said. "Hello?"

"Mary, sorry I had to take off this morning," Wes said quickly. "I want to make up for it. Can we have dinner tonight?"

Mary gulped. She covered the receiver of the phone.

"He wants to have dinner," she whispered to Suzie.

"Make him work for it," Suzie advised.

Mary nodded. "Well, I'm a little busy tonight," Mary said mildly. "It is very short notice after all."

"I know," he sighed into the phone. "If you're too busy we can do it another time. I was just hoping to get some time with you."

"I think maybe I could swing it," Mary said quietly. Suzie winked at her.

"Oh great, how about six?" he suggested.

"Wait just a minute," Mary said. She covered the phone again. "He wants to have dinner at six, but Warren should be arriving about then."

"I'll be fine," Suzie assured her. "It'll be fun to have something to do!"

"All right," Mary laughed a little. She uncovered the phone. "You can pick me up at six."

"Thanks Mary, I'm looking forward to it," Wes said before hanging up the phone.

"See," Suzie said with a smile. "He's making dates with you, he's obviously interested."

"Or he wants to let me down easy in a public place," Mary pointed out.

"If he does, he's an idiot," Suzie said as she pulled the car into the long driveway at Dune House. The beautiful old structure rose up regally against the sky. Where it stood perched above the beach it looked like it had a bird's eye view of the entire town. Suzie stared at it for a moment, still amazed that it belonged to her. She

and Mary had turned it back into its former glory as a bed and breakfast, and the business was steady. But that wasn't why Suzie loved it. She loved it because it was something that she and Mary had created together. She glanced over at Mary and smiled as the woman fumbled with her purse and the door handle of the car.

Mary was one of the kindest, gentlest people she knew. Luckily, she was best friends with Suzie, who would defend her against anyone who tried to hurt her. Mary had a far more gentle approach to things than Suzie, so sometimes Suzie felt as if she needed to step in and be a little more forceful in order to shield her. Of course that had led to a few disagreements between them. But as she watched Mary walk up towards the front entrance of Dune House, Suzie felt that familiar surge, the need to protect her. Suzie only hoped that she was being paranoid.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

After returning to Dune House, Suzie spent a little time tidying up her room. She and Mary both lived in the B & B. Suzie had decorated each room in a different style. They each had their own theme. She was constantly redecorating her own room. Her most recent theme was nautical with shells, old maps, and vintage pictures of beach paradises. It made her feel a little closer to her boyfriend, Paul, who was often out on the water as he was a professional fisherman. However, the sand mural she had been attempting to create had turned into a complete disaster, which included sand being stuck in between the wooden slats of the flooring in her room.

Suzie was working on getting the sand free when she heard the sound of the doorbell ringing. She had locked up because they did not have any guests, and they were not expecting Warren Blasser until later in the evening. When she reached the door the person outside had already rung the doorbell quite a few more times. She peeked through the windows that framed the door and saw a man standing outside. He was short in stature, a little on the heavy side, and wearing a nice suit. Suzie didn't recognize him and so she guessed that he was not a local. She unlocked the door and opened it.

“How can I help you?” she asked in a friendly tone.

“Do you have a room available?” the man asked breathlessly as he stepped inside. Suzie regarded him skeptically. They didn’t often get guests on the spur of the moment as they usually called ahead to reserve a room. However, there were several rooms available, so she decided it couldn't hurt.

“Sure,” she said. “Let me just get some information from you and we'll get you all set up.”

“Great,” he said as he followed her to the front desk. “I'm sorry to just show up, but my other reservation fell through.”

“Are you visiting Garber?” Suzie asked as she opened up the registration form on the computer.

“Passing through,” he replied. She looked up at him again. She was fairly cautious about her guests. This man seemed a little sketchy, but he spoke politely and his eyes seemed kind enough.

“Your name please?” she asked.

“John,” he said quickly. “John Richardson,” he added. Suzie typed the name into the computer.

“How long do you think you will be staying?” she asked.

“Probably just the night,” he said. “Maybe two,” he shrugged a little. “I’m paying cash so I’ll pay for the first night now.”

“Okay,” Suzie smiled warmly as he handed her the money. “My name is Suzie, if you need anything. We offer breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Of course there are many wonderful local restaurants.”

“Thanks,” he nodded. “My room?”

“You'll be in room seven,” she said and handed him a key. “I'll show you the way.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“Did you want to get your luggage?” she asked.

“I don't have any,” he replied vaguely.

Suzie considered asking him why he didn't have any luggage, but she didn't want to be too nosy. She led him to the room which was on the second floor. She opened the door for him.

“The phone will dial to the desk if you need anything,” she explained.

“Great,” he nodded. “I really just need some rest.”

“Well, you'll get plenty of that here,” Suzie said with a warm smile.

“Wonderful,” he said. He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. Suzie lingered for a moment outside the door, then headed back down to the first floor to finish checking him in. When she reached the first floor, she ran into Mary who was nervously straightening her skirt.

“You look beautiful,” Suzie said as she walked up to her.

“I feel frumpy,” Mary admitted with a sigh. She brushed her auburn hair back from her eyes and frowned. “Who ever thought dating at my age was a good idea?” she asked.

“At your age?” Suzie clucked her tongue. “Mary, don't let your

birthday get to you. You are a beautiful, amazing woman and Wes is lucky that you even look in his direction."

"That's sweet of you to say, Suzie, but I don't know that he feels the same way," she bit into her bottom lip. "Things are so different now. When we were young if someone dated you, they dated you, only you, and there weren't all these questions to think about. I have no idea whether we are even really dating. Are we exclusive? Are we friends? What does he expect?"

"Wow, wait a minute," Suzie said and rested her hands lightly on Mary's shoulders. "You need to take a breath. Dating is supposed to be fun, remember?" she asked as she looked into her eyes.

"To be honest, Suzie, I'm about ready to call it all off," Mary frowned. "Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but it seems like Wes is losing interest."

"Maybe you need to give it a little time, Mary," Suzie suggested. "You and Wes haven't been dating that long. He doesn't seem that confident with romance either," she pointed out. She took a breath and then looked into Mary's eyes. "Not every man is going to be Kent, Mary, I promise."

"You can promise, but that doesn't mean it's true," Mary shook her head. "Maybe it was foolish of me to think I was ready to start another relationship."

"Not foolish at all," Suzie insisted. "Just try to relax a little and see what happens. Talk to Wes about it, ask him to define what is happening between the two of you. He's probably just as nervous as you are."

"Maybe," Mary took a deep breath. "I think you're right. I'll talk to him about it tonight. It can't hurt to ask, right?" she smiled a little.

"Good," Suzie nodded. "If he gives you a hard time, just send me a text, and I'll hunt him down," she offered.

Mary grinned at her. "I think you actually would."

"Oh, you know I would," Suzie said and hugged Mary gently. "You look gorgeous," she said again. There was a light knock at the front door. The door pushed open, and Wes stepped inside. He was wearing a nice gray suit, and for once he had shoes on instead of cowboy boots. His silver-black hair was combed neatly. His expression was as difficult to read as ever.

"Evening ladies," he said as he stepped inside.

"Hi Wes," Mary smiled a little. Suzie raised an eyebrow and

stared at him. He stared back at her for a moment. He looked a little confused and then smiled at Mary.

“You look stunning,” he said warmly.

“Thank you,” Mary replied. He stepped up to her and offered her his arm.

“Ready to go?” he asked. He cast a wary glance in Suzie's direction.

“Yes,” Mary said and wrapped her arm around his. “Thanks, Suzie,” Mary said.

“Just remember what I said,” Suzie said. “Text me.”

“I will,” Mary laughed.

“It was nice to see you, Suzie,” Wes said and offered her a polite nod.

“You, too,” Suzie replied but she didn’t smile. Wes stared at her again as if he was trying to figure out why she was being abrupt. Then he shook his head and began leading Mary out of Dune House. Suzie overheard him murmuring to her.

“What was all that about?” he asked.

“Oh you know Suzie,” Mary said warmly. “She's always looking out for me.”

Suzie smiled at her friend's words. After the door closed behind the two she set about preparing for their next guest's arrival.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

Not long after Mary left, there was another knock at the door. Suzie had just finished pouring herself a cup of tea. She left it on the counter as she walked towards the door to answer it. Unlike the earlier guest, the person waiting outside did not repeatedly ring the doorbell. Suzie opened the door and smiled at the man who stood outside. He was tall and very thin. The type of body that she would describe as willowy. His hair was thin and wispy, light brown in color. He had a long nose, and thin lips arranged in a serious expression.

“May I help you?” Suzie asked.

“Yes, my name's Warren Blasser,” he replied in an even tone. He spoke as if each word was carefully selected. “I was told there would be a room here for me.”

“There is,” Suzie smiled warmly. “Welcome, please come in,” she stepped aside so that he could walk in. He had a small overnight bag as well as a soft-sided briefcase. “How was your drive?” she asked as she walked over to the reception desk.

“It was fine,” he said with a slight shrug.

“Would you like anything to eat or drink?” she offered as she opened up the registration form on the computer.

“I had something along the way,” he explained. “Really, I'd just like to rest up a bit.”

“Okay, well I'll get you right to your room then,” Suzie offered as she tapped in some of his information on the computer. “My name is Suzie, if you need anything,” she added. “We provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner,” she continued.

“I'm not much for breakfast,” the man explained as Suzie began to lead him towards the stairs. She noticed the way his eyes were roaming over the interior of the house. “Just some coffee will be

fine."

"Certainly," she nodded. "I'll make sure that there is a fresh pot."

She paused at the bottom of the stairs. Warren had stopped in the middle of the living room area. His gaze was settled on the light fixtures.

"Remarkable," he said in a whisper. "Are these original to the house?" he asked.

"I believe so," Suzie nodded. "We had to do some rewiring of course."

"Of course," he nodded and continued to study them. "I am always so pleased to see people take the time to preserve the past," he said. "There's so much that is just swept away, without people ever noticing the value in what they are bulldozing."

"That's true," Suzie smiled a little. "We tried not to do that too much here."

"I can see that," he said with appreciation. "So much is lost already to natural disasters and the destruction of wars, it makes such a difference to put in a little extra effort to let things remain as they are. I've seen many old homes turned into bed and breakfasts or restaurants, and the owners practically gut them," he cringed at the idea.

"Hopefully that will never happen here," Suzie said. "I personally think that the structure and design of an old home holds many secrets, things that the people of the time when it was built didn't write down, but are still conveyed through the things they built and how they built them."

"Exactly," he said with a breath of relief. His hand lingered on the railing as they began to go up the stairs. She noticed his look of disappointment.

"Unfortunately, some things had to be replaced for the sake of safety," Suzie explained. "I wish the original structure could have lasted forever, but I wouldn't want any of my guests to be hurt either."

"Some things can't be avoided," he agreed. "At least you haven't plastered the fireplaces with plasma televisions or cut out skylights to appease the tourists."

Suzie laughed at the idea. "That would be a little absurd wouldn't it?"

"You'd be surprised," he said as they paused outside the room

that he was staying in. “I once stayed in a bed and breakfast that boasted it was built in the civil war era. They had a spa bath, a television that hung from the ceiling and was nearly as wide as the bed, and heated floors. I'm not sure what any of that had to do with the civil war.”

“Me neither,” Suzie laughed again. She was enjoying her talk with Warren. It wasn't often that she had the chance to pick the mind of a history buff. She opened the door to the room for him. She had chosen it specifically for him. It was the room she had designed to be an 'antique' room. Everything used to decorate the room was purchased locally from antique shops, estate sales, and roadside stands.

“How beautiful,” he said with a secretive smile as if he knew that she had chosen it just for him. Suzie walked over to the curtains and drew them apart, revealing an uninterrupted view of the sea.

“Amazing,” he breathed as he walked towards the window. Suzie thought he was talking about the view, but his eyes were locked on the intricate wall hanging beside the window. Suzie smiled to herself. Warren Blasser was certainly proof that beauty was in the eye of the beholder.

“There's a balcony,” she explained. “Just make sure you lock the door when you turn in for the night.”

“I will,” he said. He seemed to be enthralled by a small statue he had picked up off one of the shelves. Suzie was glad that he was enjoying the room.

“I hope you enjoy your stay,” Suzie said. “The telephone will dial the desk if you need anything.”

“Uh huh, thank you,” he nodded, obviously distracted. She stepped out of the room and headed back down the stairs to the first floor. She had some birthday planning to catch up on. Now that she had confirmed the flights for Benjamin and Catherine, Mary's son and daughter, she had to make sure the caterer was going to show and that the bakery was working on the cake. Suzie wanted everything to be just perfect for Mary. She only hoped that the gesture would show her just how special she was to Suzie. She had just finished the last of her phone calls when she heard a sound outside the door. She wondered if it might be another unexpected guest. When she checked the clock she saw that it was a little after seven. She walked over to the door just as it was swinging open.

She felt a little fearful as she wasn't expecting anyone to just walk in. But when she saw Mary step through the door, her fear melted into sympathy.

“Mary, what are you doing home so early?” Suzie asked as she walked up to her friend. Mary closed the door firmly.

“He got a phone call,” she said in a tight voice. “He said it was an emergency and sent me home in a taxi before we had even gotten our order.”

“Oh Mary, I'm sorry,” Suzie said and hugged her. “Maybe it was an emergency, maybe it was work,” she suggested.

“No, it wasn't,” Mary said with certainty. “He was smiling, Suzie. I can't believe I let myself be so foolish as to believe that he would really want to be with me. I can tell you this much, I'm not going to be somebody's pet that they pick up when they feel like it. As far as I'm concerned Wes can go find someone else to send home in a taxi,” she spat out each word. Suzie had never seen Mary so angry, unless it was after a fight with Kent. Her heart broke for her friend that she was experiencing this kind of frustration again.

“Maybe…” Suzie started to say.

“No,” Mary said sternly. “Sorry, Suzie, but I don't want to talk about it anymore. I just want to go to bed,” she sighed and marched off to her room.

Suzie watched her go. Her blood began to boil as she thought of Wes. She had been wary of him from the start, but then he had seemed to reveal himself as a decent and thoughtful man. Now she felt differently. She wondered if all of the kindness was a smokescreen he had thrown up just to draw Mary in. Suzie was beside herself with anger. She wanted to protect her friend.

Suzie hesitantly walked up to Mary's room. She listened for a moment. She could hear Mary crying quietly. It was a terrible sound for Suzie to hear. It made her furious. She wanted to open the door and hold her friend tightly in her arms, but she knew better. Mary often liked to be left alone when she was upset. If she wanted company she would ask. Suzie frowned and walked away from her room. She went so far as to pick up her phone and dial Wes’ number. It went to voicemail right away as if he had turned off his phone. “Aargh,” Suzie growled in frustration and hung up the phone.

“Everything okay?” a voice asked from behind her. She spun around quickly to discover Warren standing behind her. She

blushed, embarrassed that he had seen her so angry.

“I'm so sorry,” she said. “I didn't know you were there.”

“No need to apologize,” he said with a small smile. “We all have those moments. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Suzie smiled at him. She thought his offer was very sweet. “Thank you, but it involves matters of the heart, you know how that goes,” she laughed a little.

“Not really,” he admitted. “I've never been terribly interested in them.”

Suzie raised an eyebrow. “Well, lucky for you,” she said with genuine admiration. “They are very murky waters.”

“Indeed,” he nodded. “I was just going to take a walk along the beach. Would you like to join me?”

Suzie stared at him for a moment. The invitation was unexpected. She couldn't tell if he was just being friendly, or if he wanted something more from her. She wondered if she had done anything to give him the impression that she would be interested. She didn't think Paul would appreciate her taking an evening walk on the beach with a man she barely knew. Of course, she was a free woman.

“I'm sorry I have some other things I have to do right now,” Suzie said quickly.

“No problem,” he nodded. “I just thought it might help you calm down if you got some fresh air.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I think I'll just find my tea and try to relax. You should walk to the north, there are some flat rocks that you could sit on and see the stars.”

“Thanks for the tip,” he said. He offered her a quick nod and then headed off down the hallway. Suzie was about to try calling Wes again when her phone began ringing in her hand. She saw that it was Paul. Despite the fact that she had declined the invite to go on the walk she still felt a little guilty as she answered the phone.

“Hey sweetie,” she said softly.

“Hello beautiful,” he replied. She grinned. She had always teased her friends about the cutesy names they would use with their boyfriends or husbands, but now she understood how it could make you smile no matter how silly it was.

“How are you doing?” she asked as she leaned back against the wall and sighed.

“I'd be better if I was with you,” he replied in a sultry tone.

“Well, that can be arranged, can't it?” Suzie said with a soft laugh.

“Do you have guests?” he asked.

“I do, but they are settled. I can spend a few minutes on the porch with you,” she assured him.

“Perfect,” he said swiftly. “I can be there in about ten minutes.”

“I'll be waiting for you,” Suzie replied happily. As she hung up the phone she felt a familiar excitement that was only triggered when Paul was on his way to see her. She headed out to the front porch to wait for him. She looked up at the sky which was filled with stars. As she leaned against the railing of the front porch she gazed up at the rising moon. Sometimes in the bustle of life she forgot just how breathtaking the view from Dune House could be. She had been to many beautiful places, but there was something special about Garber, and the small stretch of beach that it claimed. Maybe it was the lack of tourist traps, or maybe it was the surprising quiet in the evenings, all she knew for sure was that she had never felt more at peace.

When Suzie heard the rumble of an engine she turned back to the parking lot, expecting it to be Paul pulling in. However, the car that slowly rolled past was not one that she recognized. It was a dusty mustard color. It moved so slowly that it left her unsettled. Then she watched as it nestled itself in the thick brush on the side of the parking lot. Suzie was sure that the driver hadn't seen her. She hadn't turned on the porch light as she didn't want to disturb either of her guests. But obviously the driver was up to something suspicious. She was halfway down the driveway when she saw another pair of headlights pulling in. This time it was Paul. He pulled up beside her and rolled down the window.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked as she continued to walk past him.

“Did you see that car when you pulled in?” she asked, distracted.

“What car?” he frowned and parked the car. Suzie was still walking to the end of the driveway when Paul caught up with her. “Where are you going?” he asked. He was obviously confused.

“There was a car that just pulled in. It's hidden in the brush,” she said and pointed to the subtle glow of the taillights.

“What's it doing back there?” Paul said as he craned his neck. “Did it look familiar?”

“No, I've never seen it before, not even around town,” Suzie said.

“Well, let's see if we can find out what's going on,” Paul said and wrapped his arm around her. Just as they were about to get to the car, it suddenly pulled out. It spun around and then slammed on the gas. It tore down the road before Suzie could get a glimpse of the license plate.

“Wow, he's going somewhere in a rush,” Paul said with a growl in his voice.

“I wonder where to?” Suzie shook her head.

“Doesn't matter now,” Paul said. “He's already gone.”

“Don't you think it was odd though?” she asked as she met his eyes.

“Very,” Paul agreed. “But maybe he was just lost and looking at his map or something,” he suggested. As they walked back towards the porch, Paul pulled her a little closer. “Try not to worry about it.”

“How could I worry with you here?” she asked with a slow smile.

“That's a nice thing to say,” he said and helped her up onto the porch.

“It's the truth,” she replied and smiled warmly at him. “I'm glad you're here.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” he said and hugged her.

“I wish you didn't have to go back out so soon,” she admitted.

“I know, but I'll be back in time for the party,” he pointed out and met her eyes. “I think that it is going to be great.”

“I hope so,” Suzie nodded. She was still a little distracted by the car she had seen.

“Don't worry so much, Suzie,” he kissed her cheek gently. “Everything is going to be just fine.”

“Maybe it will,” Suzie said grimly.

“Just relax, it will all be okay,” he gave her a soft kiss before pulling slightly away.

“Thank you, I hope you’re right,” Suzie said and kissed him again.

“I better get going,” Paul sighed. “I have to prepare the boat for shipping out.”

“Thank you for the visit,” Suzie smiled.

“Can we have dinner tomorrow night?” Paul asked. “I know you

have guests, but I'd love to see you before I launch."

"I'm sure Mary will be willing to handle things," Suzie nodded.

"Great," Paul smiled. "If you see that car again make sure you call Jason to check it out," he said sternly. Then he turned and walked away. Suzie watched him go until the headlights of his car pulled out of the parking lot.

"Now, I see why you turned down the walk," a voice said from behind her.

"Warren," Suzie said as she turned to face him with a smile.

"Looks like you've got a good man there," he said with a half-smile.

"The best," Suzie nodded.

"Well, I'm going to turn in for the night. Nice beach you have here," he said before he turned and walked back into Dune House. Suzie lingered for a few minutes on the porch. She was waiting to see if the car would drive by again. The street in front of Dune House remained quiet.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

Eventually Suzie went back inside. She wanted to check on Mary. When she paused outside her door she still heard quiet crying. Suzie raised her hand to knock, but then stopped herself. It was hard for Suzie to resist, but she forced herself to walk towards her room. She felt a surge of fury rush through her as she blamed Wes for causing her friend such pain. She was very tempted to get in her car, drive over to his place, and teach him what happens when someone messes with Mary. But Suzie knew that Mary wouldn't want that either. She sighed as she stretched out in her bed. She closed her eyes and tried to distract herself with thoughts of the party, but her mind kept returning to Wes and how hurt Mary was.

She was so concerned and angry that she couldn't get to sleep. She lay awake for hours after she went to bed. As she was tossing and turning, she heard a scream. Suzie bolted up out of bed at the sound. It was followed by a loud thump. Her heart jumped up into her throat. She didn't know what had happened, but she was sure it was bad. She grabbed her phone and opened her door. When Suzie ran out into the hall Mary was already there. Her eyes were wide.

“Did you hear that?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“I did,” Suzie replied.

“I'll check upstairs,” Mary said.

“I'll check outside,” Suzie called back as she ran for the door. The thump had sounded like it came from the side of Dune House. As she ran across the sand, her feet slipped a few times. She was more tired than she had realized. But that sensation of exhaustion disappeared entirely when she came upon a body laying face down in the sand.

“Oh no!” she shouted as she realized it was Warren.

“Suzie, is he alive?” Mary called down from the balcony of

Warren's room. Suzie looked up to see that the railing was swinging free. Nervously she reached down to touch the side of Warren's neck. Her eyes misted with tears as she felt no sign of a pulse. Suzie's stomach clenched with dread as she gave in to what she already knew to be true.

“I don't think so,” Suzie said. “I think he's gone.”

“This is unreal!” Mary called out. “I'll be right down!”

“I better call Jason,” Suzie said more to herself than to Mary.

“Jason, I'm sorry, I know it's late,” Suzie said quickly into the phone. “We have a big problem here, I need the police out here right away. One of our guests is dead.”

“What?” Jason spat back, his voice becoming more alert. “I'll send everybody out, I'll be there in just a few minutes. Are you safe?”

“Yes, I don't know what happened,” Suzie said tearfully. “I don't know what happened,” she repeated, panic starting to rise in her voice.

“Just try to stay calm, I'll be there in a few minutes,” he promised before hanging up the phone. Suzie hung up as well. Mary emerged from the side door of Dune House and rushed over to Suzie. Waves crashed hard against the beach, moistening the air with their spray. Suzie felt a sense of emptiness in the darkness that surrounded her.

“How could this happen?” Mary asked with disbelief as she stared down at the body. “Is that the insurance man?”

“Warren Blasser,” Suzie said softly, her voice trembling. “He was such an interesting person. So nice.”

“What are we going to do, Suzie?” Mary asked as she looked up at the broken railing. “How could the railing have given way? Is this our fault?” she asked with a gasp.

“Someone must have shoved him into it,” Suzie said with a slow shake of her head. “It couldn't have given way on its own. I know it couldn't. We had all of the railings and balconies inspected.”

Sirens screamed through the early morning darkness shattering the silence that filled the space between them. Suzie shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. She wondered how this was going to be handled.

“Mary, stay close to me,” Suzie said with some urgency in her voice. “The killer may still be in Dune House, or at the very least nearby.”

“I'm not going anywhere,” Mary assured her. She looked warily around at the sprawling stretch of sand. It was empty for the moment, but that didn't mean that somebody hadn't been there only moments before.

Three police cars and an ambulance skidded into the parking lot. One officer, Suzie’s cousin, Jason, climbed out and ran across the sand to reach Suzie's side.

“Are you okay?” he asked breathlessly. The paramedics rushed past him to confirm that Warren was indeed dead.

“I think so, Jason,” Suzie said. “I have no idea what happened. I couldn't sleep, I heard a scream, and then…”

Jason peered up at the railing. “I thought you had those updated?” he asked with an edge to his voice. “I told you to make sure that you did.”

“I did,” Suzie insisted. “We tried to keep the look as authentic as possible, but every balcony was updated and inspected. Someone must have pushed him off. The murderer must still be on the loose and may be nearby. You have to send officers to search the beach.”

Jason frowned and lifted his hat off his red hair. “It doesn't look like a murder, Suzie. It looks like he leaned on the railing and it broke, allowing him to fall.”

“That's not true,” Suzie insisted. “Like I said all of the balconies are solid.”

Jason waved to one of the other officers who was jogging towards the entrance of Dune House. Then he glanced over at Suzie with some concern. “Maybe you missed one,” he said.

“Excuse me?” Suzie asked defensively. “I didn't miss any balconies. When I inherited this house I knew your father had let it get run-down, I had this place inspected from top to bottom and you know that, Jason,” Suzie was really starting to get aggravated.

Jason frowned. “I know,” he said quietly. “I know this is all very upsetting. I'm not trying to make it harder on you. But mistakes can happen, Suzie.”

“It wasn't a mistake,” Suzie insisted with frustration. “The car!” she suddenly announced.

“What car?” Jason asked, obviously confused.

“I saw a car driving by the parking lot really slow earlier this evening. It parked in the brush by the driveway. It must have been the killer.”

“The killer?” Jason frowned again. “Suzie, just take a breath, I

think you're getting ahead of yourself."

"Jason, you can believe what you want, but this was a murder," Suzie huffed.

"I'm going to take a closer look, then maybe we can figure out what happened," Jason said and walked away from her towards Dune House. Suzie watched him step into the home that used to belong to his father. She respected Jason as a police officer, and as her cousin, but she didn't like what he was implying. If he was so quick to assume that it was an accident, which might imply that it was due to negligence on her part, then wouldn't everyone else be quick to assume the same thing?

"What did he say?" Mary asked as she walked away from the paramedics and over to Suzie.

"He thinks the railing gave way," Suzie said darkly. "He thinks it was nothing more than an accident."

"Well, that is how it looks," Mary said as she watched the officers step carefully out onto the balcony.

"You know that's not possible, Mary," Suzie said and turned to look at her friend. "Don't you?"

"I do," Mary agreed. "I was here for the inspection, I saw it with my own eyes."

"I'm sure they're going to find some evidence of someone else throwing Warren off the balcony. But the question is why?"

"A murder at Dune House," Mary sighed. "Even after we prove that it wasn't our fault, we are going to take a hit for this. Good thing it is after tourist season."

"That's one good thing at least," Suzie replied as she watched the officers inspecting the loose railing. "But, I have a feeling we're going to need all the help that we can get with this."

"I think so, too," Mary agreed. "I'll be back in a second, I'm just going to see that John hasn't been woken by the commotion." She walked back into the house. Suzie realized that she was still in her loose nightgown with all of these people around her. She shivered in the cool breeze that was coming off the water.

"Here," Jason said from beside her. She hadn't even seen him come back outside. He draped his jacket around her.

"Thank you," Suzie said quietly. His expression was tight, his eyes narrowed. "What is it Jason?" she asked.

"Suzie, I'm going to have to ask you a few questions," he said with a frown. "I know that it's going to be awkward, but I have

paperwork that I have to fill out before I can wrap this up."

"Wrap this up?" Suzie asked with shock. "What are you talking about? Do you know who did it?"

"Who did what?" Jason asked. "It was an accident, Suzie."

"That's impossible," Suzie frowned.

"Suzie, there is no evidence of the railing being damaged. There's no sign of any struggle in the room, or on the balcony. My best guess is that the victim walked out on the balcony to wait for the sunrise, and when he leaned against the railing, it gave way."

"How could it?" Suzie demanded. "It was sturdy, we had it inspected…"

"It looks like it might have lost a screw or two. Maybe in the high winds we had a couple of weeks ago," he shrugged. "Sometimes the weather does more damage than we realize."

"Jason, there's no way," Suzie insisted. "I check the balconies after every weather event."

"Maybe you overlooked one," Jason said grimly.

"No, I didn't," Suzie said, anger rising in her voice.

"Look Suzie, I know that this is going to put Dune House into a bit of a mess, so I understand why you're upset. But I need to ask you a few questions for the record, so are you going to answer them or should I get one of the other officers?" he narrowed his eyes.

"Fine, fine," Suzie waved her hand. "Ask your questions."

"Did you have any recent complaints from guests about the state of the balconies?" he asked.

"No, of course not," Suzie snapped in return.

"Did you actually see the victim on the balcony before he fell?"

"No," she growled. "I heard a scream, and then a thump, I came running out here to check what it was and found Warren on the ground."

"Okay, I think that should cover it," Jason said as he put away his paperwork. "If you think of anything else to add, just let me know. The victim will be taken to the medical examiner for an autopsy, but pending the results this is being considered an accidental death."

"This is terrible," Suzie muttered under her breath. "Jason, you must know that we would never put anyone in danger."

"All I know is that there is no evidence of a struggle, no evidence of external damage to the balcony, and the only injuries I've seen on the victim are those caused by the fall. You say you had

the balconies inspected, I believe you, Suzie. But this is a big house, and one balcony could have been missed, or maybe the damage wasn't noticed. It wasn't a murder," he said flatly. "That means it's not my department anymore."

"It was," Suzie crossed her arms. "Someone killed that poor man and you're going to just write it off as an accident. Jason, you have to do your job and look into it properly," Suzie demanded. As soon as she spoke the words she regretted it. Jason's expression hardened.

"Suzie, just because you don't want it to be accident due to the railing, doesn't mean it isn't," he shot back. He took a deep breath and swept his gaze over the scene which was flooded by flashing lights. "Listen, if anything comes up in the autopsy or any other evidence comes to light, then we can start an appropriate investigation. Until then, the death is considered accidental," he turned and walked away from her. Suzie watched her young cousin go. She was sure she had gone too far with the remark about him doing his job properly. The truth was, he was a good police officer. Suzie knew that. She also knew he could only work from the evidence that was in front of him.

As Suzie watched the police officers begin to leave, and Warren's body was whisked away to the medical examiner's office, she wished she could force them to stay. She was certain that they were missing something important. Mary walked over to her as the last police car pulled out of the parking lot.

"Where is everyone going?" she asked with concern.

"They don't believe me," Suzie said impatiently. "Not even Jason or Kirk."

"It's okay, Suzie, try not to let it get to you," Mary said soothingly.

"I'm not going to let it get to me," Suzie said sternly. "I'm going to solve this murder myself if they won't do it."

"No, you are not," Mary shot back just as sternly.

"What are you saying, Mary?" Suzie asked incredulously. "Do you really just expect me to allow someone to be killed at Dune House without getting to the bottom of it?"

"Of course not," Mary shook her head. "But you will not be solving this crime, we will be solving this crime," she looked into her friend's eyes. "You're not alone in this, Suzie."

Mary's words caused a warm smile to rise to Suzie's lips. "Thank

you, Mary," she said.

"Where do we start?" Mary asked as she swept her gaze over the towering form of Dune House. In the pale light of dawn it looked more like a ghost than a beautiful, old building.

"We need to inspect the balcony, and Warren's room," Suzie said.

"Then let's get started."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

Suzie and Mary began walking towards Dune house. “If we believe that this wasn't an accident then we need to think about who would have done this to Warren and why,” Mary pointed out. “There's got to be a reason this happened. It seems to have been obviously orchestrated not just some random event.”

“You're right,” Suzie said as she held open the door for Mary. “I saw this car lingering around the house earlier this evening. I tried to tell Jason about it, but I don't think that he listened. It's possible that the car had something to do with Warren’s death, especially if he was murdered.”

“The important thing is that we know that it wasn't our fault,” Mary said as they walked up the stairs towards the room that Warren had been staying in.

“That won't make much of a difference when we get hit with a lawsuit,” Suzie pointed out gravely. “We need real evidence, real proof that this was not an accident. That's not even the worst part. The worst part is that there won't be any justice for Warren's death. I know that he was killed, and yet his death will be ruled an accident. His friends and loved ones will never get the proper closure that they deserve. I hate to think that all of this could happen under our roof.”

“I know,” Mary nodded when they reached the landing of the third floor. “All we can do is hope that the autopsy turns up some evidence. Maybe, we'll find something while we're looking around the room, but I doubt the police will have missed anything. You know that Jason usually does a very thorough job, and his new partner, Kirk, seems to pay keen attention to detail.”

“Don't be so sure,” Suzie said. “If they made the assumption that it was an accident then they could have very easily overlooked

some important evidence. Assuming things can make you blind."

"Not Jason though," Mary pointed out. "He's very observant, and very good at his job and Kirk seems to be as well."

"Maybe so, but as far as I'm concerned he jumped to the same incorrect conclusion that the rest of the police officers did, so we can't rely on him finding any evidence," she frowned as she recalled the way that she had spoken to him. "I think I might have upset him," she added quietly.

"You were upset, Suzie," Mary said with a slight shake of her head. "In the heat of the moment we all say things that we don't really mean."

"But I shouldn't have said it," Suzie sighed as they reached the room that Warren had been staying in. The police had sealed off the door so no one could get in. Suzie pushed the tape aside and opened the door with her key. "Sometimes I forget that Jason and I are just about the only family we both have. I'd hate to alienate him because of a little squabble."

"I think Jason is sturdier than that," Mary assured her. "Trust me, my kids and I had plenty of arguments, and each one made me worry. Would they ever speak to me again? Would they hold it against me forever? But life happens, people forgive, and we all move on. It's going to be fine, Suzie, I promise."

Suzie felt a little better. Mary always had wisdom to share, especially when it came to dealing with the younger generation. Suzie was a little too impatient to try to look at things from their perspective, but Mary always took the time to look at things through the eyes of others. Hopefully that would help them find some real evidence about what had happened to Warren.

"Jason was right, not a thing is out of place," Suzie said grimly as she looked around the room. She ducked her head into the bathroom. All of the towels were hanging perfectly. There was nothing missing. When she stepped back into the room, Mary was studying the bed.

"It looks like he might have just got up," Mary said as she pointed to the way the blankets were shoved aside. "It looks as if he got up quickly. It doesn't look like he had been watching television. The remote for the television is over here," she pointed to the bureau the television was sitting on. "Maybe he was sleeping and something woke him, something startled him."

"Yes, so why did he get up and go onto the balcony?" Suzie

asked thoughtfully as she looked around the room for an explanation.

“Maybe he had a nightmare,” Mary suggested and tapped her chin lightly. “Maybe he had a phone call that woke him.”

“I can check the call logs to the room,” Suzie said with a slow nod. “I'm sure Jason has taken his cell phone and wallet so that he can make next of kin notifications. We won't be able to tell if he had a call at that time. Hopefully, Jason will at least check that.”

“Well, he didn't take this,” Mary said as she slid something out from under the bed. It was a soft-sided leather briefcase.

“See what I mean?” Suzie said with annoyance. “If they had done a thorough search they would have found that underneath the bed. Instead it is here for us to find.”

“Maybe, but what matters is we found it,” Mary said with some excitement. “Maybe there's something in here that could tell us why someone would want to kill him. Maybe he had been involved in some criminal behavior, or he had recently made someone angry enough for them to want him dead.”

“Do you think the murder could have something to do with Louis' rare book?” Suzie suggested curiously.

“Maybe,” Mary shrugged. “But what could it have to do with it? Louis has the book at his house. Warren didn't even have it yet. So, why would he be killed over it?”

“Good point,” Suzie nodded and stepped up beside her.

“Let's see what is in here,” Mary said.

She set the briefcase down on the bed and popped it open. Inside were a few file folders, a deck of cards, and a few packs of gum.

“Looks like the folders are for different clients,” Mary said. “Here is Louis'.”

She set the folder down on the bed beside the briefcase. Suzie picked it up and flipped it open. Inside were the photographs of the book that Louis had sent to Warren before Warren had agreed to come out to value it. Warren had made a few notes on the white frame around the photographs.

“The book looks authentic. If it is it will be worth a lot. I have some concern about the binding,” Suzie read aloud as she turned the picture.

“What concern do you think he had about the binding?” Mary asked suspiciously.

“He seemed to have circled the thread,” Suzie said as she pointed to a mark on the picture.

“Hmm,” Mary said as she studied the picture. “I wonder why he circled it.”

“No idea,” Suzie sighed.

“Well, then I guess we're back to square one,” Mary said with a light cluck of her tongue.

“Okay, let's forget about the book for the moment,” Suzie said. “Let's walk through what his last moments were like,” she cringed at saying those words. It was still hard for her to believe that Warren was actually gone.

“Okay, well we know that he was likely asleep,” Mary said.

Suzie walked over to the bed and stood beside it. “Which means that it would have been dark,” she said and pointed to the light switch. “Turn off the light please, Mary,” she said. Mary walked over to the light switch and flipped it off. The room was plunged into darkness, but for the dawn's light that was beginning to filter in through the sliding glass doors that led out onto the balcony. “Okay, so he wakes up,” Suzie said with a frown. “We don't know what woke him, but let’s presume that it made him jump up out of bed,” she said and walked to the end of the bed. “It's dark. Does he go over and turn the light on?” Suzie asked.

“When I came up here the light was off,” Mary said. “I turned it on when I walked into the room.”

“Wait a minute,” Suzie said and narrowed her eyes. “Was the door locked?”

“Yes, I had the master key with me,” Mary said. “I grabbed it when I heard the scream. It sounded like it was coming from this room, so after knocking and calling out when I received no answer, I unlocked and opened the door and stepped inside. It was dark, I called out again and I still heard no answer. I flipped the light on,” she said.

“Okay, so when he got up out of bed, he didn't bother to turn the light on,” Suzie said with a grim frown. “If I hear something that startles me, one of the first things I do is switch on a light,” Suzie pointed out.

“Me, too,” Mary nodded.

“So, either he knew what the sound was, or he was so startled by it that he didn't feel he could take the time to turn the light on,” Suzie explained. “If the door was locked, then it's not likely

someone was in the room with him. So, how could he have been shoved off the balcony?" she frowned and shook her head.

"Wait, you're getting ahead of yourself," Mary warned as she stepped closer to Suzie. "He's up, he hears something, maybe sees something, but more than likely hears it since it is dark. He doesn't turn the light on, he wants to know what that noise is. No one is in the room with him. He must think it's coming from outside, right?" Mary said as she walked towards the sliding glass doors.

"Okay, so whatever he hears, is coming from outside," Suzie said softly. "That would explain why he wouldn't turn the light on. Maybe he was frightened and didn't want to reveal that he was awake."

"What could he hear from outside that would cause him to be frightened though?" Mary asked with a frown. "Remember, it couldn't have been too loud, or we would have heard it, too."

Suzie and Mary stood in silence for a few minutes. Suzie kept thinking about what would cause her to be startled and even frightened if she woke up to the sound of it. Suddenly her heart dropped.

"Knocking," she said in a whisper. "He must have heard knocking, on the sliding glass doors."

"Oh yes!" Mary nodded. "That would have made him jump up out of bed. He would have been afraid to turn the light on, and he would have crept outside to see what the noise was."

"Okay, so he decides he's going to look outside, which means that whatever was causing the sound was not something that he could see through the doors. He opens the door," she said as she slid the glass door open. She gazed out at the dangling railing where there was more tape that the police had put there to warn people that it was unsafe. "He steps outside."

"Be careful, Suzie!" Mary said as Suzie stepped out onto the balcony.

"I am," Suzie promised her. "He's outside and, then what?" Suzie asked, puzzled.

"If there was someone knocking then they might have been waiting for him on the balcony," Mary suggested. "Maybe when he stepped out, the person shoved him hard enough to break the railing."

Suzie frowned. "That makes sense, but it can't be true," she said.

"Why not?" Mary asked with confusion.

“Jason said there was no damage to the railing, no sign of it being broken. Instead it looks like it just came loose,” she shook her head. “But you and I both know that there is no way the balcony came loose.”

“Okay,” Mary murmured thoughtfully.

“Besides, even if the murderer was up here with Warren, where did he go?” Suzie asked. “Not to be morbid, but how long do you think it could have taken for Warren to fall from the balcony to the ground?”

“Not long,” Mary grimaced.

“About as long as the scream we heard,” Suzie pointed out. “You went upstairs, I went outside. How could the killer have had time to escape if we were covering both ways to exit?”

“Good point,” Mary nodded as she glanced around the balcony. “Even if he had a rope attached to the balcony, we would have found the rope.”

“It's too far to jump,” Suzie pointed out.

“Unbelievable,” Mary sighed. “It's no wonder Jason thought this was an accident. It's nearly impossible to prove otherwise.”

“But it wasn't an accident,” Suzie reminded her sternly. She just hoped that she was right. “So, there must be something here that we're overlooking. So, what is it?” Suzie mused as she stood in the middle of the balcony. It seemed very sturdy despite the railing being broken. It was still anchored to the side of the house. It was designed not to collapse even in the highest winds. Suzie felt secure standing on it. “If the killer was not on the balcony, what did Warren see when he stepped out here?” she frowned.

“From the way he landed I think it’s very likely that he was leaning on the railing,” Mary pointed out as she stepped out onto the balcony as well.

“So, he was too frightened to turn the light on,” Suzie said as she looked back into the dark room. “But something prompted him to step all the way out onto the balcony, and lean on the railing.”

Suzie walked towards the edge of the balcony where the railing and wooden slats swung free from the base of the balcony.

“Suzie, be careful!” Mary said gravely. “That is a long way down.”

“I know it is,” Suzie agreed and stopped about a foot away from the edge of the balcony. “So, Warren walked over to the railing after seeing that no one was on the balcony. Maybe he continued to

hear something. Maybe he could tell that now it was coming from below him."

"That would make him lean against the railing in order to look over the side," Mary said with a slight nod. "So, whoever did this, was still trying to coax him out to the edge of the balcony even if they weren't on the balcony waiting for him."

"And because they weren't on the balcony, there is no evidence left behind," Suzie said with a deep sigh. "There's not going to be any physical evidence of the killer up here, because he might not have ever been up here."

"He let the balcony do his work for him," Mary said. She cringed. "Which also gives the killer a clear cover for the murder, because it sure does look like the only possibility is an accident due to a weak railing."

"Who in the world would go to this much trouble?" Suzie asked with disbelief. "We still don't know how the killer lured Warren out here, or why."

"No, we don't," Mary agreed. "But we do suspect that he was lured. So, someone likely waited until he thought we would all be asleep. He wanted this done at a time that no one could possibly stop it, or catch him."

"If I wasn't awake, it might have taken me even longer to get out there," Suzie said grimly.

"What about our other guest?" Mary asked. "Do you think we should check on him?"

"I think if he slept through the sirens and the commotion then he deserves a good night's sleep," Suzie said with a sigh. "I'll explain everything to him in the morning."

"It is the morning," Mary pointed out as she looked out over the water. The colors of the sunrise were spilling out across the calm slate of the water. It seemed as if the waves had hushed in reverence to the transition from night into day.

"It's beautiful," Suzie said solemnly as Mary came to stand beside her. Even though something horrible had happened just a little while before, the view from Dune House was still too stunning for words.

"Maybe we should try to get a little rest," Mary suggested.

"Not yet," Suzie said. "I want to make sure that I've scoured every inch of this balcony first."

"Okay," Mary nodded and swept her gaze over the balcony.

“There isn't much to see though.”

“We must be missing something,” Suzie said under her breath.

Suzie crouched down and studied the floorboards of the balcony. She could see where there was some scuffing from shoes, but there was no actual damage to the wood. She knew that the balcony was in very good shape. She wasn't sure what she was looking for. She was hoping that there might be some hint of what happened carved into the wood. As she neared the edge of the balcony the only thing she noticed were some pistachio shells. She narrowed her eyes at the sight of them.

“Well, that's a little odd,” Suzie said to herself.

“What is?” Mary asked when she overheard her comment.

“There are pistachio shells over here,” Suzie explained and picked one up. It looked fresh enough to have been tossed in the last few days, but Warren was the only one she had rented that room to, and that was only because of the antiques that she had decorated the room with.

“So, he was snacking?” Mary asked with a frown. “Maybe he had them earlier, but if he had them just before he fell off the balcony I guess that throws a wrench in our theory about him being frightened.”

“It doesn't make sense,” Suzie agreed and dropped the pistachio shell. “I don't know, Mary, maybe we're thinking about this all wrong. What if he knew that there would be someone outside?”

“Like a meeting he had planned with someone?” Mary suggested.

“Sure. Maybe he had set an alarm to wake up at a certain time. He didn't turn the light on, because he didn't want to alert any of us that he was awake. Then he went out on the balcony to wait, with his pistachios,” she shrugged.

“I don't know, if he had a meeting, why would he be on the balcony?” Mary pointed out. “Why wouldn't he have met them downstairs where he could have spoken to them more directly?”

“Who knows,” Suzie sighed. “I don't think this investigation is getting us anywhere.”

“Let's take another look inside,” Mary suggested. “There still might be something we're not thinking about.”

“Okay,” Suzie nodded, but her shoulders had slumped with defeat. She didn't want to admit it out loud but she could see why Jason had found it hard to believe that this death wasn't an

accident. Everything about the scene pointed to an accident. Maybe it was just an accident after all and she just didn't want to admit that they had a faulty railing. Suzie tried to push that thought from her mind, probably because she simply didn't want to believe it.

Suzie stepped back into the room with Mary just behind her. When she slid the door shut, she noticed a strange spattering of marks on the glass. The morning sunlight filtering through the glass made it very easy to see. They didn't look like fingerprints.

"I wonder what caused this," Suzie said as she studied the marks. "I know they weren't here before Warren checked in. I did a thorough cleaning."

"Sometimes you can't get all of the smudges," Mary pointed out. "Sunlight can be very unforgiving."

"I guess that you're right," Suzie nodded. She ducked down to look under the bed again. Then she picked up a few of the pillows to see if there was anything hidden underneath. She found nothing unusual. She picked up the trashcan which only had a few papers in it. One was a receipt from a restaurant on the way to Dune House. Suzie remembered that he had said he ate on the road. Another paper was a scribble of what looked like one of the antique vases that lined the shelving. The last piece of paper was crumpled up. Suzie thought it might be very important. If he had taken the time to wad it up into a ball he probably didn't want anyone easily seeing what was written on it.

"I think we've got something, Mary," Suzie said. She carefully unfolded the paper.

"Oh yes, you have something all right," Mary gulped out and cringed at the sight of the used chewing gum that Suzie had unveiled.

"Gross," Suzie cringed and wadded the paper back up. "That's it then," she said with a huff. "There's nothing. There's not even a bag of leftover pistachios around here."

"We should have a look around down below the balcony, too," Mary suggested.

"Good idea," Suzie nodded. She walked back across the room to lock the doors that led to the balcony. She didn't want there to be any chance of anyone else getting hurt. When she turned back to leave the room, she saw the mirror positioned on the bed across from the sliding glass doors. In the mirror she could see the sun rising, the water glistening, and the balcony railing swinging. Her

heart skipped a beat as she wondered just for a second if somehow Warren's death really was her fault. As she stared through the mirror she noticed the smudges on the glass door again. She was certain they hadn't been there when Warren checked in. With a shake of her head she left the room. She locked the door behind her.

“Are you okay?” Mary asked when Suzie joined her in the hallway.

“I don't think I will be until we find out what happened,” Suzie admitted. She felt a heavy weight on her shoulders. She knew that she still had a birthday party to plan. Benjamin and Catherine would still be flying in, and they would expect to be able to celebrate with their mother. Suzie had to find a way to juggle everything, and she still wanted it to be a surprise for Mary. As they walked down the stairs to the lobby, Suzie noticed John standing by the front desk. He looked a little uncomfortable. Suzie assumed he had seen some of what happened.

“Sorry for all of the commotion,” Suzie said sadly as she walked over to the desk.

“I'll make some coffee,” Mary offered and headed for the kitchen. Suzie was sure that she was going to need some to get through the rest of the day.

“What happened?” John asked. “I woke up and saw a bunch of police cars driving off. Was there a break-in?”

“Not exactly,” Suzie stared at him for a moment. She had no idea what to tell him. A man had died. She considered it murder, the police considered it an accident, but John was looking at her expectantly as he waited for an explanation. “To be honest we're not exactly sure what happened yet,” Suzie said finally. She expected that John would question her further, but he only nodded.

“Well, I need to head off today, so I just wanted to check-out,” he explained. Suzie pulled up the billing program on the computer.

“Of course. There is nothing outstanding as you paid already for the room and didn’t have any meals.”

“Great,” he nodded and handed her the key.

“Thank you for staying with us, John. I hope that you will consider Dune House as an option for future travel.”

“I will,” he nodded a little. Then he turned and hurried out the door. Suzie watched him leave. She thought he was a little odd, but then she was used to many of her guests being unique.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

“Coffee,” Mary said as she walked into the lobby with two cups.

“Excellent,” Suzie said and took the coffee mug from her. “Thank you.”

“Did the other guest leave?” she asked as she leaned against the desk and took a sip of her coffee.

“Yes,” Suzie said with a frown. “I don't think he heard anything that happened, he just saw the police cars as they were leaving.”

“Suzie, I know you don't want to think about it, but news of this death is going to get around Garber really fast,” Mary said hesitantly. “I hate to say it, but we might have to think about how we are going to counter the rumors. It's not going to look too good for Dune House if people are talking about a fatal accident.”

“I know,” Suzie admitted grimly. “I was hoping to prove that it wasn't an accident, but it looks like that will be much harder than I initially thought. All we can do at this point is hope our good reputation will stand up against the gossip.”

“Too bad we haven't even been open a year,” Mary pointed out. “We don't even know everyone in town all that well. Don't you think they will be quick to blame this on us?”

“I'm sure they will be,” Suzie set down her coffee mug. “But we can't control what people say. All we can do is try our best to find out the truth. I can't worry about business when there's a man who has lost his life, with no one looking for his murderer.”

“No one but us,” Mary pointed out. “Maybe I'll try giving Wes a call. I could see if he would check out that car you mentioned. If Jason won't do it, or can't, then maybe Wes will.”

“You wouldn't mind calling him?” Suzie asked. “After the way that he treated you last night?”

“I had a little time to cool down,” Mary admitted. “I really think

that maybe I was being a little too sensitive about things."

"Birthdays can do that to people," Suzie reminded her. "But I don't think that you were out of line for how you felt. He left you in the middle of dinner, and didn't even bother to drive you home himself. I was so mad that I…" she stopped suddenly.

"That you what?" Mary demanded as she met Suzie's eyes. "Suzie, what did you do?"

"Nothing too serious," Suzie said with a grimace. "It's not like I egged his car or anything. I just called him to give him a piece of my mind."

"Suzie, you didn't!" Mary gasped, horrified by the idea.

"Well, no I didn't," Suzie frowned. "I was sent to voicemail."

Mary sighed with relief. "Suzie, I know that you're only trying to help me, but I really don't want you getting in the middle of this. What is between Wes and me is between Wes and me. Okay?"

Suzie frowned. "I don't know if I can promise that Mary. I just don't want him to hurt you."

"I can take care of myself, Suzie," Mary stated.

"Of course you can," Suzie blushed. "I just get so angry when someone does something to hurt you, Mary. You mean the world to me, and you're always doing things for others. I just want to see your kindness rewarded, not taken advantage of."

"I understand, Suzie," Mary smiled warmly. "But you have to remember, I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself. I would like to be able to handle this on my own. So promise me that you will stay out of it, please?"

Suzie grumbled a little. She stalled by taking a sip of her coffee. The last thing that she wanted to do was agree to what Mary was asking. Suzie wanted to protect Mary if she felt the need to. But Mary continued to stare straight at her, offering her no option to get out of the promise.

"Fine," Suzie finally agreed reluctantly. "I will stay out of it, unless you say otherwise."

"Thank you, Suzie," Mary said. She leaned across the desk and hugged her friend. "I'll go call Wes," she said as she headed off to her room. Suzie was still in her robe. She knew she needed to get dressed. Her mind was spinning as she walked towards her room. She had no idea how to explain Warren's death, she simply knew that it wasn't an accident. She set her coffee mug down on her bedside table and walked over to her closet to pull out some

clothes. While she was dressing she remembered that she was supposed to meet Paul for dinner that night. Once dressed she sat down on the edge of her bed and picked up her phone. If he didn't know about the death yet, he would know soon enough. She wanted him to hear it from her first. She could only hope that he wouldn't share Jason's opinion. He answered on the third ring.

“Hello?” he asked with a bit of heaviness in his voice. Suzie realized it was still quite early and he had likely been sleeping.

“Sorry to wake you,” Suzie said softly.

“Don't be sorry, your voice is the best sound I could wake up to,” Paul said warmly. Suzie smiled a little despite her worry.

“A guest died here early this morning,” Suzie said quickly. There was no easy way to break the news.

“Huh? Wow,” he said. “How did that happen? A medical issue?”

“No,” Suzie frowned. “He was killed.”

“Killed?” Paul nearly roared. “Where are you? Did they catch the killer?”

“I'm at home, at Dune House,” Suzie explained. “No one is even looking for the killer. Jason believes that it was an accident.”

“Maybe you could start from the beginning and explain all of this to me?” Paul asked. “I know you must be upset.”

“I am,” Suzie admitted and began to tear up. “I talked with the man last night, he was very nice. I had no idea that something like this would have happened.”

“How could you know?” Paul asked grimly.

“Early this morning, before the sun came up, I heard a scream. The guest, Warren, had fallen from the balcony on the third floor. I found him on the sand below, he was already gone,” she explained.

“So, it was an accident?” he asked with confusion.

“No,” Suzie said firmly. “There's no way it could have been an accident. The railing was secure, it wouldn't have just given way.”

Paul was silent on the other end of the phone for a moment. “Well, it's not likely,” he agreed. “Did the police find anything to indicate foul play?”

“No,” Suzie sighed. “Mary and I searched the balcony as well. The only thing suspicious was that car I told you about yesterday, remember?”

“I remember,” Paul said gravely. “I wouldn't read too much into that though, Suzie. You know that it could have just been someone having a look.”

“I know that,” Suzie said impatiently. “I also know that there is no way this was an accident.”

“Hey, slow down, Suzie,” Paul said firmly. “You don't have to convince me. I'm on your side, love, if you say it wasn't an accident, it wasn't an accident.”

Suzie smiled with relief at his words. “Thanks Paul, I needed to hear that.”

“I just hope you and Mary are careful. If there is someone on the loose that caused this man to die, then you need to be extra cautious, in case he intends to come back,” Paul pointed out.

“I don't think they'll be back,” Suzie said grimly. “We were all vulnerable last night, but Warren was obviously targeted. There's no reason why someone would go to all the trouble of attacking someone on the third floor unless they intended him to be the victim.”

“I'm sure the police will figure this out,” Paul said carefully.

“They're calling it an accident, Paul, I don't think that they'll even investigate it,” she muttered.

“Jason's a good police officer, Suzie, he'll figure it out,” he assured her. “Do you want me to come over?”

“No, that's okay,” Suzie sighed. “I'm going to do some cleaning around here and prepare some things for the party.”

“You're still having it?” he asked.

“Yes, Benjamin and Catherine already have their plane tickets, and I've already paid for the cake and catering. I don’t want to cancel it now,” she explained.

“Okay,” he agreed. “Does that mean we're still on for tonight?” he asked hopefully.

Suzie thought about it for a moment. She wasn't sure if she could enjoy a dinner date with all of this on her mind. But it would be her last chance to see Paul before he shipped out. She didn't want to miss out on that.

“Yes,” she finally said.

“Good,” he said with relief. “I can't imagine launching without getting to spend a little time with you first. I'll pick you up around five?”

“Perfect,” Suzie replied. She just hoped that she would be in a better mood by then. After hanging up the phone she took a moment to sit on the side of the bed. What had happened was a lot to process. How to deal with it, was even more difficult. She wasn't

sure how she could just go on about her day. Sure, there were things to do for the party, and there were things to do to defend Dune House against potential lawsuits, but all she could think of was Warren sprawled across the sand. Her mind was stuck on how that could have happened.

She could have kicked herself for not questioning John, the guest who had just checked out, more thoroughly. Maybe he had noticed something, maybe he had heard something that could have given her a clue. Suzie doubted it, but it still would have been better if she had asked. She knew that Jason would be handling notifying the next of kin, but she wondered if anyone had notified Louis yet. She walked towards the kitchen. Mary was leaning against the counter, staring aimlessly at a bagel that had popped up out of the toaster.

“Did you talk to Wes?” Suzie asked as she plucked the bagel out of the toaster. “Butter or cream cheese?” she asked.

“Jelly,” Mary replied, still in a bit of a daze.

“Jelly, are you sure?” Suzie asked with surprise. “You never want jelly on your bagel.”

“I'm trying out something new,” Mary explained and then blinked a few times. “Yes, I spoke with Wes,” she added.

“How did that go?” Suzie asked and cast a sidelong glance in her direction.

“Well, let's just say that he was very apologetic,” Mary replied with a grimace. “I just don't think he realized how rude it was to run out on me like that. Of course he didn't really explain why he took off.”

“At least he is aware of the error of his ways,” Suzie pointed out. She spread a healthy helping of grape jelly across each side of the toasted bagel.

“Yes, that's true,” Mary nodded. “When I told him what happened, he was pretty upset.”

“Did he believe you when you told him that it wasn't an accident?” Suzie asked. “That's the important question.”

“I don't know to be honest,” Mary sighed. “I kept insisting that the railing was sound, and he kept insisting that if it wasn't, the fault should be placed on the company that we hired to update the balconies.”

“So, he just talked around it,” Suzie asked with a grim frown. “I didn't expect much different from him.”

“Well, it doesn't matter what he, or Jason thinks, we know the truth, Suzie,” Mary said firmly.

“Here’s your bagel,” Suzie said and handed her the plate. “Did you mention the car that I saw to Wes?”

“Thank you,” Mary said with a warm smile. “I did mention it to him. He said that he would look into it, but just a color and description isn't much to go on.”

“Great,” Suzie sighed. “Well, at least he is going to look into it. I think I'm going to call Louis and see if anyone has contacted him about this.”

“About what?” Louis said from the front door. Suzie realized she had left the exterior door open when she came back inside.

“Louis,” Suzie said, her heart pounding faster.

“Is Warren up yet?” he asked. “I was going to take him to breakfast. No offense against your cooking, Mary, I just thought it would be a courteous thing to do.”

Mary grimaced and set down her plate. “I don't think that is going to be possible, Louis,” she said gingerly.

Suzie braced herself. She walked towards Louis, who looked a little confused. “Unfortunately, Louis, Warren died early this morning,” she said matter-of-factly. She believed in ripping the band-aid off quickly, especially when it came to news like this.

“What?” Louis' eyes widened. “Are you playing some kind of prank on me?”

“No, Louis,” Mary said in a soothing tone. “We're telling you the truth. Warren died early this morning, his body is at the medical examiner's office.”

“What? Why?” Louis asked and grasped the kitchen counter to hold himself up. He had gone very pale. “How did this happen?” he demanded.

“He fell from the balcony,” Suzie explained haltingly. “Well, we believe he was killed, the police believe it was an accident.”

“If I had known that it wasn't safe here…” Louis gasped out.

“Louis, please,” Mary said. “You know how careful we have been with restorations. We didn't cause this to happen.”

“You said you think he was killed, why do you think that?” Louis asked desperately.

“Because I don't believe that the railing could have given way that easily,” Suzie said with confidence. “What happened is a tragedy, but I do not believe that it was an accident.”

“Does it matter?” Louis asked in a whisper. “Whether he was killed or it was an accident, he's gone. Because of me.”

“It's certainly not because of you,” Mary said swiftly. “You couldn't have known any of this would happen.”

“But he never would have been here if it wasn't to evaluate my book,” Louis pointed out tearfully.

“Louis, it's going to be okay,” Suzie said and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “I know this is quite a shock, but it is going to be okay.”

“I hope so,” he murmured. “I guess I should go. I should probably call Gerald. I don't know.”

“Have some coffee, Louis,” Mary said. “Take a seat, and drink some coffee. It'll help you settle down.”

“I don't think I should,” Louis sighed. “I was so excited about Warren's visit that I didn't sleep at all last night. If I drink coffee I'll be wired.”

“Maybe it's best if you do go home and get some rest then,” Suzie suggested.

“I think that would be best,” Louis agreed. He looked between the two women. “I'm sorry for what I said. I didn't mean to accuse you of anything.”

“It's okay,” Mary said. “I'll walk you out.”

“Thanks,” Louis nodded. As Mary walked him out of Dune House, Suzie frowned. She knew that Louis was just the beginning. Everyone in Garber would soon believe that a fatal accident had occurred at Dune House.

“I think I'm going to lay down for a little while,” Mary said when she walked back inside. “I don't know if I'll be able to sleep, but I need to get off of my knees.”

“I understand,” Suzie nodded. “I'm going to see if I can persuade Jason to take another look at this situation.”

“Good luck,” Mary said. “Wake me if I can do anything to help.”

“Get some good sleep,” Suzie said as she pulled out her cell phone. While Mary walked down the hallway to her room, Suzie dialed Jason's number.

“Hi Suzie,” Jason said when he picked up on the first ring.

“I just wanted to check in with you, Jason, and apologize for the way I spoke to you earlier,” Suzie added.

“No need,” he replied calmly. “I know emotions run high when something like this happens.”

“That's true, Jason. But I want you to think about the possibility that maybe I was right. Maybe there is something more to all of this than you can see on the surface,” she pressed.

“Oh, Suzie you're not still on this murder idea are you?” he asked grimly.

“I am,” she replied. “Because I know that it is true. Warren Blasser was murdered. How can you not even want to look into it?”

“It isn't about what I want, Suzie,” Jason said in a colder tone. “This is my job here. I can't look like a fool to everyone around me just because you have a hunch.”

“It's more than a hunch, Jason,” Suzie sighed and pressed the phone tighter to her ear. “Listen to me. I had those railings and the balconies updated and inspected. I wouldn't lie to you about that, Jason. I know that we're still getting to know each other, but if I thought it was possible that this was an accident I would admit to it.”

“I know that, Suzie,” he said gently. “I don't want you to think I don't believe you. I know that you believe that this could not have been an accident. Don't think I'm not looking at that angle, it's just that right now there is absolutely nothing to point to foul play. Maybe when the results come back from the autopsy tomorrow, we'll get a better idea of what really happened. Until then, I think you should just do your best to prepare for what those results might be.”

“I'll try,” Suzie said. “I appreciate you listening to me, Jason.”

“Suzie, you know how much I respect you. Just give me some time to see if anything suspicious comes up,” he said.

“Okay,” she agreed. “Thank you, Jason.” When she hung up the phone, she felt a little better. Knowing that Jason wasn't completely opposed to the idea that there had been a murder, she could relax a little. She glanced at her watch and saw that she had a few hours before Paul would arrive. She decided she would take a nap as well, even though she had a million other things that she needed to do. She didn't realize how exhausted she was until she curled up in her bed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

The ringing of Suzie’s cell phone woke her from a deep sleep. She felt like she had just closed her eyes. But when she grabbed her phone she could see that it was after five. It was Paul who was calling.

“Suzie, I'm here,” he said when she answered the phone.

“I'm sorry, Paul, I fell asleep,” she mumbled and pulled herself out of bed. “Give me a second.” She quickly got ready and then made her way down the hallway to the front door of Dune House. She unlocked the door and opened it for Paul.

“Oh sweetheart, I didn't mean to wake you,” he said quietly.

“It's good that you did,” Suzie said with a laugh. “Apparently, I was going to sleep for hours.”

“If you're not up for dinner it's okay, Suzie,” Paul said and gave her a soft hug.

“Are you kidding?” Suzie shook her head. “I'm starving.”

“Great,” he smiled. “What about Mary? Is she all right?”

“She's sleeping, too,” Suzie said. “It's probably best if we let her rest.”

“Do you need a few minutes before we go?” Paul asked. Suzie brushed her fingers back through her brassy blonde hair and shook her head.

“I'm fine, if you're ready,” she said. She suddenly had a deep desire to get away from Dune House.

“Sounds good,” he agreed. He led her across the deck and to the parking lot. Suzie searched the parking lot for any sign of the mustard colored car she had seen the night before. There wasn't a hint of it. In fact the only cars in the parking lot were the car that Suzie and Mary shared and Paul's. He opened the passenger door for her. Suzie slid inside and did her best to relax. She tried to

convince herself that there was nothing she could do at the moment. She tried to give herself permission to actually enjoy her time with Paul.

When Suzie and Paul reached their favorite restaurant, Cheney's, Suzie was still trying to convince herself. She realized she hadn't spoken a word to Paul. Paul, who was usually rather quiet himself hadn't tried to coax her into conversation, but she knew that he had noticed. They walked up to the restaurant, hand in hand, but Suzie's mind was elsewhere.

“I'm sorry all of this happened, and especially on Mary's birthday weekend,” Paul said grimly.

“Me too,” Suzie said as he held the door open for her. There was a subtle buzz of conversation when they stepped inside, but as soon as the door fell closed behind them, that buzz became stony silence. Suzie was a little confused until she noticed people leaning close to whisper to each other. The hostess offered her a sad smile. Suzie felt a sense of alarm growing within her that she hadn't felt since she was in high school and had been teased for the braces she had to wear. She wasn't sure how to react to the knowledge that everyone in the room was talking about her. She felt Paul's strong hand on the small of her back.

“Table for two,” he told the hostess.

“Paul, maybe we should just get the food to go,” Suzie said softly beside his ear.

“Nonsense,” he replied. “I'm going to take any chance I have to show you off.”

Suzie raised an eyebrow at that. “I don't think that anyone wants me to be here,” she said.

“I do,” he said and met her eyes intently. “It's just you and me, sweetheart, nobody else here matters.”

Suzie realized he was trying to prevent her from running and hiding, but she wasn't so sure she agreed with him. She did her best to make it through the meal without bolting out the door, but she had a hard time thinking about anything other than the dirty looks, and curious stares she continued to receive. Obviously the rumor had spread through the majority of the town. Now, people were likely debating whether the death was the fault of Dune House and its owner.

Paul signaled to the waitress to bring their bill. Suzie felt a sense of relief. She couldn't even enjoy her food as her stomach was in

knots. While they waited for the bill Suzie did something she almost never did. She pulled out her cell phone at the table. She texted Jason to see if he had found out anything about the case. She also sent a text to Mary to check on her. She wanted to do anything to avoid noticing the people around her who were judging her.

“Why don't we go for a walk?” Paul suggested. “It's a nice night for it.”

“I'd like that,” Suzie said and finally put her phone away.

As they left the restaurant Suzie could feel the eyes of others on her. She wasn't sure if she was just being paranoid, or if there really was something for her to be suspicious about. Either way she imagined that they were thinking horrible things about her. She was hoping that a little fresh air and escape from the people of Garber would help clear her mind. Paul led her down towards the harbor where his boat was docked.

“You seem a little preoccupied,” Paul said quietly as they walked hand in hand.

“I'm sorry,” Suzie said with a slight frown as she looked over at him. “Between this situation with Dune House, and Mary, I am a little preoccupied.”

“The party?” he asked and raised an eyebrow. “Do you need help with it?”

“No, it's not the party,” Suzie sighed. “I've barely even thought about the party since all of this happened. It's Wes.”

“Detective Brown?” Paul said with a grimace.

“I know you're not a fan,” Suzie shook her head. “Maybe I should have listened to you.”

“Now, I may not be a fan, but he's turned out to be a decent guy,” Paul shrugged a little. “I don't think he'd do anything to hurt Mary.”

“Well, he seems to be up to something, and it's really getting to Mary,” Suzie explained. “I just wish I could fix it for her. With her birthday coming up, it's not a great time for her to be worrying about romance.”

“That's true,” Paul said and wrapped his arm around her waist. “But you can't make people do what you want, I've tried,” he said thoughtfully. “As hard as it might be you're going to have to let things play out between Mary and Wes.”

“I know,” she frowned. “I just have a hard time watching her get hurt.”

“Of course you do,” he leaned close and kissed her cheek. “It's never easy. But keep in mind, sometimes things are not how they look on the surface.”

“I think Mary's spent enough years dealing with a man who played games with her,” Suzie said darkly. “She deserves more than that. She deserves to be happy.”

“And you know as well as I do, that another person can't do that for you,” Paul reminded her wisely. He paused in the moonlight, and drew her close. “She is a lucky woman, Suzie, she has you in her life to love and protect her.”

“I guess,” Suzie shook her head. “But now with the possibility of us being sued, what happens if we lose Dune House, where will that leave her? She has nowhere else to turn. Her kids are in college, her ex-husband took the house and the savings…”

“Take a breath,” Paul advised and looked into her eyes. “Sometimes you just have to have faith that it will all work out.”

“Faith?” she looked at him with surprise. “You're one of the biggest cynics I know, Paul.”

“Thanks, I think,” he said with a half-smile. “That is true, but I learned that having a little faith can make a big difference.”

“How?” she asked curiously.

“When I fell in love with you,” he explained as he held her gaze, “I wanted to make you see just how good we could be together, but I couldn't do that. You didn't want to see it. I just had to have faith that you would feel the same way I did, and now look where we are.”

“True,” Suzie said hesitantly. “I didn't think you were ever going to last.”

“Thanks a lot,” Paul said with a laugh and leaned in for a quick kiss. When he pulled away he was smiling. “I guess I had faith enough for both of us.”

“So, what you're saying is I need to stay out of it,” Suzie said grimly. “I'm not too great about keeping my nose out of things.”

“Not necessarily stay out of it, but take a step back and let things play out as they will. Mary needs to figure things out for herself. You and I both believe that railing was tampered with. The proof will come to light with time,” he studied her intently. “I don't want to go off to sea worried about what you might be getting in the middle of, Suzie. If someone really did murder Warren Blasser, then that person is dangerous.”

“This isn't going to be one of those lectures about me not putting myself in danger is it?” Suzie asked with a subtle sigh of impatience.

“Maybe,” Paul admitted. He shrugged and swept his gaze over the water before looking back at her. “It's hard to be so far away from you, to not be able to protect you.”

“I can appreciate that,” Suzie said diplomatically. “But you have to remember that I've been in plenty of dangerous spots before you came along, Paul, and I can handle myself.”

He reached up and lightly stroked her cheek as he gazed into her eyes. “I have no doubt,” he murmured. “Just like Mary has been through very difficult times, and has made it through.”

“Oh you,” Suzie slapped him playfully on the shoulder. “I see what you did there.”

“Do you?” he wiggled his brows. “I thought it was pretty good.”

“It was,” Suzie sighed. “But I'm still going to investigate.”

“Oh, I know you are,” Paul said with a short laugh. “I'd be a fool if I thought you weren't. Just be careful. Make sure Jason is helping you.”

“I will,” she promised him. “Even though I've pulled myself out of a few dangerous situations, Paul, you'll always be my favorite rescuer.”

“Aw, that's sweet,” he said and slipped his hand into hers. As they started to walk again he stole a glance over at her. “I love you, Suzie.”

“I love you, too, Paul,” she said and hugged his arm.

After Paul dropped Suzie at home he left to prepare for his launch. Suzie still felt uneasy. Paul's words had made sense to her, but she was still boiling with irritation at Wes. She tried to distract herself by thinking about the railing and how it might have come loose.

She knew that it had to have been tampered with, or maybe she just really hoped it had been. What she couldn't figure out was who would have wanted Warren dead.

“Suzie, is that you?” Mary called out from the laundry room.

“Yes, it's me,” Suzie called back. “Need help?” she asked when she stepped into the laundry room.

“I'm just getting fresh sheets ready for the bed in room five,” she explained.

“I don't think anyone will be sleeping in them for a long time,” Suzie said with a sigh. “I still can't believe it happened. But everyone in town can, and they think that it was an accident, or possibly negligence.”

“We know better,” Mary reminded her but she could see the doubt in Mary’s eyes.

“I just don't know how to convince others of that,” Suzie said still partly trying to convince herself.

“Me neither,” Mary agreed as she shook out the sheet she had just pulled out of the dryer. “You and I both know there is no way that railing gave way.”

“We had every balcony inspected,” Suzie recalled and narrowed her eyes. “Maybe the inspector made a mistake.”

“No way,” Mary shook her head. “He was very reputable. Besides, we did a walk through with him, and I distinctly remember him leaning on the railings to show us they were strong.”

“Yes, that's true,” Suzie nodded. “I remember that now. But still, maybe we did cut corners.”

“Don't talk like that,” Mary said firmly. “There's no way we would have cut corners when it comes to a safety issue.”

“You're right,” Suzie leaned back against the wall of the laundry room. “Did you hear anything more about the murder from Wes?”

“Actually I did,” Mary nodded. Her expression darkened. “He said he was sorry about the death, and that he would do his best to help us out if he could, but it's not his jurisdiction so he can only investigate so much. Can you believe that?” Mary narrowed her eyes.

“Well, it's not his jurisdiction,” Suzie pointed out. “Not only that, Jason can barely help us because it's being ruled accidental and I think he believes it is.”

“That's not the point is it, Suzie?” Mary snapped. Suzie's eyes widened. It wasn't often that Mary actually got upset.

“I'm sorry,” she said quickly.

Mary sighed and set down the folded sheet. “No, I'm sorry, Suzie. I didn't mean to snap at you. I know you're right. It's just, I expected him to swoop in and take charge I guess. I don't know, maybe you're right, maybe I have been reading too many romances.”

“There's nothing wrong with romance,” Suzie said gently. “All I'm saying is that Wes’ hands probably really are tied. Just like Jason's.”

“But he didn't even come over to check on me,” Mary pointed out. “Of course, I told him not to,” she frowned.

Suzie pulled her into a warm hug. “These things are never easy, Mary. But no matter what happens, we'll get through it together.”

“I know,” Mary said as she hugged her back. “If there's one thing in this world I know I can rely on, Suzie, it's our friendship.”

“That's for sure,” Suzie said with a laugh. “Now, I think we have earned some wine and chocolate. What do you say?”

“Heavy on the chocolate, light on the wine,” Mary requested as they walked into the kitchen.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

Early the next morning Suzie headed to the library to check on Louis. She made a few stops along the way for party supplies, since Mary was not with her. She was more than a little concerned about how Louis had behaved the day before. She knew that he was likely still taking Warren's death very hard. When she arrived at the library she was surprised to see that there was a police car in the parking lot. When she stepped inside the library she spotted Jason and his partner, Kirk, standing at the front desk with Louis. Louis was red in the face and obviously frustrated.

“Look, I don't know who would have done it,” Louis said, clearly aggravated. “I think that you need to be out looking for the criminal who stole my most valuable possession, rather than wasting your time here asking me the same questions over and over again.”

“Louis, I'm just trying to get as much information as possible so that I can solve the crime,” Jason said calmly.

“What's going on?” Suzie asked as she walked up to them both.

Jason cast a wary glance in her direction. “Louis had a break-in last night,” he explained.

“A break-in?” Louis repeated. “Is that really what you're calling it? The most important thing in my life was ripped out of my home, and you call it a break-in?”

“The book?” Suzie asked and narrowed her eyes.

“Yes,” Louis said with exasperation. “First Warren was killed, and now this. I don't think I can take any more. If I don't get that book back, I'm going to lose it. I should have left it here, I never should have taken it home.”

“Relax, Louis,” Suzie assured him. “Jason is a great police officer and he will take care of this for you.”

“I can't, I just can't,” Louis said tearfully. He walked off towards

the employee lounge of the library. Suzie stared after him sympathetically.

“So, now I'm a great police officer?” Jason asked, reminding her that he was still there.

“Jason, you know I didn't mean what I said,” Suzie said with a sigh. “But surely you can see that there is a case here now. Obviously, whoever killed Warren was also after the book.”

“Obviously?” he asked and raised an eyebrow. “Is that an investigative term?”

Suzie narrowed her eyes as she studied Jason. She had never seen him so snippy with her before.

“Are you going to tell me that you don't think that there's a connection between the two crimes?” she asked incredulously.

“I'm not saying that, I'm just saying that the evidence isn't there to support that connection,” Jason explained and shook his head. “We can't just make assumptions.”

“Assumptions like I must be lying about the renovations I did on the house?” Suzie asked.

“I never said you were lying,” Jason pointed out. “Sometimes things are overlooked.”

“So, now I'm a liar, and I'm cheap,” Suzie said with disbelief. “It's good to know your real opinion of me, Jason.”

“Suzie, you know that's not the case,” Jason said impatiently.

“Maybe that's the problem,” Suzie said with a sigh. “I don't know. What I do know is that this was no accident. Are you going to investigate it as a murder, or not?” she asked.

“I can't,” Jason said with a frown. “Not without some kind of evidence. But what I will do is keep an ear out and I will do some investigating and see if any new evidence comes to light. If anything comes up, I will let you know right away.”

“Fine,” Suzie nodded. She had a million other things she wanted to say, but she didn't think it was appropriate library conversation.

“Suzie,” Jason warned her as he met her eyes. “I want you to stay out of this. No conducting your own investigation. It could come back to hurt you, since the death took place on your property.”

Suzie nodded and then walked away from him without saying anything more.

“I mean it, Suzie,” Jason called after her. Several people in the library shushed him for raising his voice. Jason shook his head and

walked out of the library.

Suzie was more than a little annoyed. She knew that Jason had to do his job, but she felt as if she was the one that was doing it for him. Her cell phone began ringing. She pulled it out to see that it was Mary calling. “Hello?” Suzie asked. She stepped out of the library so that her conversation wouldn't bother anyone.

“Hey Suzie,” Mary said. “I just wanted to check on you, and see how Louis is doing.”

“Not well,” Suzie replied. “Someone broke into his house and stole the book that he was trying to get insured.”

“Unbelievable!” Mary said with a shake of her head. “What are the chances of that?”

“Not likely,” Suzie replied. “I think that there must be a connection between Warren's death and the stolen book. Of course, Jason doesn't seem to agree,” Suzie said and made her best attempt not to roll her eyes.

“Do you think that there is a way we can get some proof that it was connected?” Mary suggested.

“I don't know what proof that would be,” Suzie sighed as she walked towards her car. “I can't really blame Jason, there simply is not any evidence. Even the person who stole the book left no evidence behind.”

“Well, come home, we'll have lunch and brainstorm,” Mary said. “I hate to say it, Suzie, but we may need to focus more on damage control than the murder investigation.”

Suzie grimaced as a group of women walking past all began whispering and glaring in her direction. “I think you might be right about that,” she said. Suzie was just about to get into her car when she heard footsteps behind her. She froze, and then slowly began to turn. She found Louis standing just behind her.

“Sorry if I scared you,” he said nervously. His eyes were red-rimmed. Suzie knew how much that book had meant to him.

“It's okay, Louis,” Suzie said gently.

“I heard what Jason said,” Louis explained. “That he didn’t think there was a connection between the death and the robbery.”

“He might be right,” Suzie said in a mild attempt to defend her cousin.

“I get that,” Louis nodded. “But I think there’s a strong possibility that there is a connection between Warren's death and the book being stolen. I was wondering if you would help me?”

“Help you what?” Suzie asked as she met his eyes.

“I need to find out the truth so I want to investigate this crime,” Louis said. “I can't just leave this up to the police. I can't even feel safe in my own home right now.”

Suzie knew that she couldn't let it go either. “Louis, you think about all of the people in your life that might have done this. Write a list of their names. Then, we will meet later this afternoon to go over them. Right now I'm going home to try to do some damage control for Dune House, but as soon as you have that list put together, call me and let me know.”

“How will I know who to put on the list?” Louis asked as he looked up at her. “I don't have any enemies.”

“Start with people that you think would have an interest in the book then,” Suzie said. “And add anyone who is shady or has made your skin crawl.”

“I can do that,” Louis nodded. “Thanks, Suzie.”

“Call me when you have your list,” Suzie reminded him before ducking into her car.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

When Suzie arrived at Dune House, Mary was waiting for her.

“How did it go?” she asked as they shared a quick lunch of salad and half sandwiches.

“Not good,” Suzie shook her head. “The worst part is that Jason is getting really testy. He told me to stay out of it entirely.”

“He's only trying to protect you,” Mary pointed out grimly. “Kids that age think that they know everything.”

“I feel like I'm having to prove myself to my cousin, at the same time that I am trying to solve a murder.”

“Well, you and Jason really don't know each other very well,” Mary reminded her. “You've only been part of his life for a short time, and now you see each other just about every day. It's going to take some time for him to fully trust you.”

“I guess you're right,” Suzie sighed. “But I am not going to sit back and let the reputation of this beautiful place that we have restored be tarnished by rumors.”

“What can we do?” Mary asked. “We're at a dead end.”

“Not necessarily,” Suzie said thoughtfully and then took the last bite of her sandwich.

“What are you thinking, Suzie?” Mary asked.

“I'm going to check in with Dr. Rose,” Suzie said as she picked up her purse.

“Didn't Jason say to drop it?” Mary reminded her as she followed Suzie to the door.

“Last time I checked it's not illegal to drop in on a friend,” Suzie called back over her shoulder as she opened the door.

“I think you better think about this, Suzie,” Mary warned her. “I'm sure if you just ask Jason to check…”

“No, I don’t want to bother him,” Suzie said sternly. “I am going

to make sure that we get to the bottom of this."

"Okay, but call me if she found anything, promise?" Mary caught her arm before Suzie could get out the door.

"I promise," Suzie said and paused to smile at Mary. "Don't worry, I won't spend your birthday in jail."

"Good," Mary sighed. "Because last time I had to bail you out it involved going into neighborhoods that weren't exactly safe and friendly."

"Don't worry," Suzie said firmly and tried not to laugh at the memory that Mary stirred up. Then she headed for her car. Mary watched from the door until Suzie pulled out of the parking lot.

Suzie turned on her radio to try to drown out her thoughts. She didn't like to be on the outs with Jason. She knew that he was just trying to do his job. But it hurt that he didn't seem to believe that she had been as careful as she claimed with the updates on the balcony.

When she reached the medical examiner's office, there were no other cars in the parking lot. She stepped out of her car and ducked inside. There was no one at the front desk, but Suzie could hear music coming from the examination room. She knew that Dr. Rose liked to listen to music while she worked. Suzie walked up to the door and knocked lightly.

"Hello? Dr. Rose?" Suzie called out. When there was no answer she pushed the door slightly open. "Summer?" she called again. "Are you in here?"

The music suddenly turned off.

"Suzie?" Dr. Rose poked her head around the corner of the hallway. "Sorry, I didn't hear you out there. Come on back."

Suzie smiled at her. Ever since Dr. Rose and Jason had begun dating, Dr. Rose had been even friendlier to Suzie. She was just hoping that Jason hadn't warned her not to tell her anything about the exam.

"Hi," Suzie said as cheerfully as she could. "Sorry for interrupting."

"It's okay," Dr. Rose said as she snapped off her gloves and tossed them in a disposal bin. "I'm finished."

"Were you working on Warren Blasser?" Suzie asked nervously.

Dr. Rose settled her gaze on Suzie. "I don't think I should discuss the results with you."

"Oh, of course not," Suzie said mildly. "I don't want any details

or anything, I was just wondering if you had found any evidence of assault."

Dr. Rose cleared her throat. "Suzie, I know how difficult it must be for you that this happened at Dune House. But the truth is, there is no evidence of anything other than an accidental fall."

"Which I would have told you, if you had waited for me to do my job, instead of doing what I asked you not to," Jason said from just behind Suzie. Suzie frowned as she hadn't even heard him walk up behind her.

"I'm sorry, Suzie," Dr. Rose said. "I wish that I could tell you something different, but the injuries are consistent with an accidental fall."

"Okay," Suzie said, and closed her eyes. She could feel Jason glaring at her.

"There was no reason to interfere," he said sharply to her. "I told you, if Dr. Rose found anything, you would be the first to know."

Suzie took a deep breath. "I know, Jason, I'm sorry."

"You can't just take advantage of my relationship with Summer," Jason began to say, he was preparing to launch into a full force lecture, which made Suzie quite uncomfortable, since she was old enough to be his mother.

"Jason," Dr. Rose said and laid her hand lightly on his arm. "It's okay. It's not a big deal. She's just worried about Dune House."

"No," Suzie said sharply. "I am not worried about Dune House, because I already know that this death wasn't an accident. What I'm worried about is a murder going unsolved."

Dr. Rose studied her with some sympathy. "If it's easier for you to believe that he was murdered, that is up to you, Suzie, but there is nothing to indicate that. I know that a tragedy like this happening on your property is overwhelming."

"No," Suzie shook her head. "You're both wrong. Just because there isn't proof, doesn't mean that it didn't happen."

"Suzie, I think you're letting this get out of control," Jason warned her. "What you need to be doing right now is consulting a lawyer and reviewing your insurance."

"Thank you for your time," she said in a clipped voice to Dr. Rose. Without another word to Jason she spun on her heel and walked out of the medical examiner's office. She was nearly to her car when Jason caught up with her.

"Suzie, please don't be upset," he said urgently. "I didn't mean to

be so offensive. To be honest, the results were a surprise to me, too. I really thought maybe you were right, that it was deliberate. I was a little shocked when that didn't turn out to be the case."

"I still believe it, Jason. If we don't do anything to stop all of this we're going to have an unsolved murder in the town of Garber," Suzie promised him.

"Suzie, I always have your back," Jason reminded her and met her eyes. "If there's more to this, I assure you I will uncover it."

Suzie glanced up at Jason. She wanted to believe him.

"I know," she said quietly. "I'm sorry that I interfered."

"Suzie, what about the party?" Jason asked. Those words coursed quickly through Suzie. She knew that she had been distracted and the party was coming up fast.

"It's still on," she said before she hurried towards her car. She could feel Jason watching her. She thought he was trying to make sure that she actually got in her car. But when she turned back to look, he was nowhere to be seen. She had a sudden uneasy sensation that maybe it was somebody else that was watching her.

Suzie was about to return to Dune House when her cell phone began ringing.

"Suzie, I have the list," Louis said when she answered. "Can you meet me at the library?"

"Sure, I'm two minutes away," Suzie said and started her car. She drove to the library. It looked pretty dead, with only a few cars in the parking lot. As she walked in, Louis walked over to meet her.

"Where's the list?" Suzie asked.

"It's a short list," Louis replied.

"Okay," Suzie frowned. "Who is on it?"

"There's a collector from Florida that is a little obsessive and could possibly border on nuts," Louis said grimly. "Tim Barows.

Then there is an old high school friend of mine that was always jealous of everything I had. He wanted to be the one to run the school library, instead it was me. That kind of thing."

"Huh," Suzie nodded. So far she hadn't heard anything that made her very suspicious.

"Then, there is Gerald," Louis said with a grimace.

"Gerald?" Suzie asked curiously.

"He's the son of the man who gave me the book. The only reason that I'm even considering him is because the book is rare and valuable, and by all rights should have gone to him," Louis explained.

"Well, that is a pretty good motive," Suzie agreed. "Is it enough of a motive for him to steal and murder someone?"

"I don't think Gerald would do that," Louis said as he shook his head slowly. Then his eyes widened. "Then again, he was always rather snippy with me when I would visit. At the time I thought it was just because his father was sick, and he was stressed. Maybe there was more to it than that," he said. "But I still can't see him as a murderer."

"The book was worth a lot of money, maybe he didn't want to share it with someone who wasn't technically family," Suzie said with a shake of her head. "Once his father was gone, he might have thought he could take it back from you."

"So, you think Gerald broke into my house and stole the book?" Louis asked and frowned. "I don't want to believe it's true, but I can't think of anyone else who would do this."

"What about the other collector that you mentioned?" Suzie asked. "Would he or any other collector you know go to these lengths to get the book?"

"No," Louis shook his head. "A stolen book is worth nothing, all of the other collectors would know that. If a book as rare and valuable as this is reported as stolen there's no way to sell it, or even to show it off, without being arrested."

"Then why would Gerald take it?" Suzie pressed with confusion. "If he couldn't sell it, and he couldn't even show off that he had it?"

"I don't know," Louis admitted. "Maybe just to get back at me. Richard and I had a close relationship. He confided to me once that he had never felt very close to his son. Maybe Gerald was jealous of what we shared, and he just took the book to make sure that I didn't have it."

“I guess that's possible,” Suzie nodded. “A personal motive would explain why he wouldn't care about not being able to sell it. However, what in the world could this have to do with Warren's death? What would he get out of killing Warren?”

“Maybe it was just a coincidence,” Louis suggested. “Warren could have just fallen…”

“Maybe,” Suzie said with sight annoyance. “We did everything we could to ensure the safety of that balcony. I really think that Warren did not just fall. The railing did not just break. I believe it was altered.”

“Okay, okay,” Louis nodded and backed up slightly. “Let's say that Warren was murdered. That doesn't necessarily mean that it's connected to Gerald and the theft.”

“Hmm, good point,” Suzie nodded. “Will you excuse me for a moment?” she asked.

“Of course,” he nodded and narrowed his eyes. “I can't believe that Gerald would do this,” he said to himself.

Suzie was dialing Jason's number as she walked away from Louis. Jason answered on the third ring.

“Suzie, I'm so glad you called,” he said. “I know we didn't exactly have a chance to talk everything out and I think that we need to.”

“We do,” she agreed. “But can we do that later? First, I need you to look into Warren Blasser's past. See if he had any enemies.”

“Suzie,” Jason sighed. “I told you, I can't do any investigation when there is no crime.”

“I'm not asking you to do any kind of investigation, just to take a glance at the man's past,” Suzie pressed impatiently.

“I'll do what I can,” Jason replied before hanging up the phone.

When Suzie turned back to Louis she found that he was at his computer.

“What are you doing?” Suzie asked curiously as she walked up to him. She could tell that he was very focused on what he was doing.

“I'm just looking into Gerald's history a little more,” he explained. “It seems he has a lot of properties, he may be in more debt than I realized.”

“Then his motive would be even stronger,” Suzie agreed.

“Maybe,” Louis nodded with a frown. “But he wouldn’t gain financially because he wouldn’t even be able to sell it.”

“One good thing is that if it was Gerald that stole the book then there is a good chance he will still have it,” Suzie said. “He can't sell it, and it is too valuable to destroy, so he must still be holding onto it.”

“I know where he lives,” Louis said. His eyes were narrowed as he stared into space. “I can't believe he would do something like this.”

“I just hope he's only a thief,” Suzie said with a sigh.

“Do you think Jason would check it out for us?” Louis asked hopefully. Suzie frowned as she recalled the way Jason had spoken to her.

“No, I don't,” she said. “Without some kind of proof that it was Gerald who stole the book, all he can do is ask Gerald questions. That will tip Gerald off that he is a suspect. If he does have the book, he'll find a way to hide it or get rid of it, before we can get it back.”

Louis winced at the very idea. “I can't imagine never seeing that book again,” he said. He was heartbroken, Suzie could see that in his eyes. She felt badly for Louis. He could be a little snippy and arrogant, but he was always willing to help when they needed it. He was so surprised when he had an amazing gift given to him, only to have it taken away from him again. But Louis wasn't the only person that she was thinking about. She was thinking about Warren Blasser as well, whose death she was certain was connected with this theft.

“I think we should go ourselves,” Suzie said, lowering her voice.

“Go where?” Louis asked.

“To get the book back, to see if Gerald has it,” Suzie explained. “You're still friends with the family, right? We could just pop in for a visit, or maybe to tell him about the book being stolen, since it was once his father’s. That will give us a chance to look around.”

“What a clever idea,” Louis said with a smile of approval. “Are you sure that you want to get involved in this though?” he studied her for a moment. “Won't Jason be upset?”

“There’s no harm in asking a few questions,” Suzie countered. She did her best to make her voice sound confident.

“I can get someone to man the library today,” he said. “Should we go this afternoon?”

“Yes, that sounds good,” Suzie nodded. “I have an errand to run, then I'll come back to pick you up.”

“Okay,” he nodded and then looked into her eyes. “Thank you, Suzie, for helping me.”

“Thank me after we get your book back,” Suzie said. She felt a subtle thrill race through her as she left the library. She loved going on investigations like this. There were times when she really missed her role as an investigative reporter. Sure, many of her jobs had been on the boring side involving politics or celebrities, but the criminal cases were the most thrilling for her. She had left her career to become an interior decorator to give herself a change of pace, and suddenly she had become the owner of a bed and breakfast. But, she still had the blood of an investigator pumping through her veins.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

As Suzie drove down the main road, her mind focused on the task at hand. She was on her way to speak to Bill Daub, the contractor she had hired to work on the balconies at Dune House. She turned off the main street and drove about ten minutes into the next town.

Bill Daub's office was at the end of a small strip mall. She parked her car and walked up to the door of his office. Through the glass door she could see that he was speaking heatedly with another man in the office. She hesitated for a moment as she wondered if she had walked in on a private meeting. But when Bill began pounding his fist on the desk in front of him, she instinctively pushed the door open. As soon as she stepped inside the two men stopped arguing. Suzie was a little surprised when it was Detective Brown that turned around to face her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, too stunned to think about what she was saying.

“Suzie,” he said grimly. His dark brown eyes were flashing with anger. He looked back at Bill. “I was here speaking to this gentleman about his poor construction work.”

“What?” Suzie asked. She was confused as she looked over at Bill.

“Suzie, I don't understand how this happened,” Bill explained. “If you're planning to sue the company however, we shouldn't be speaking about this.”

“Sue the company?” Suzie repeated with disbelief. “This is complete nonsense.”

“Suzie, watch what you say,” Wes warned her. She glared back at him.

“I am perfectly capable of deciding what I want to say and what I don't want to say,” she said sternly. “What happened to Warren

Blasser was a homicide, and if you can't see that, then I'm starting to question your ability to be a detective."

"Hey," Wes shot back with aggravation in his voice. "You need to watch how you're talking to me."

"Do I?" Suzie asked and stepped closer to him. "Are you going to arrest me for having an opinion, Detective Brown?" she demanded.

He stared at her with shock in his eyes. "Suzie, there's no reason for you to be angry at me. I'm here defending Mary, and you. Do you know the consequences you could face if you are found negligent in the death of this man?"

"There is no way she will be found negligent," Bill interrupted with frustration.

"That's right," Suzie said grimly. "Because there was nothing wrong with the railing on that balcony."

"Somehow it broke," Wes pointed out.

"Someone had to have tampered with it," Suzie explained. "That's why I'm here, Bill," she said as she turned to face the man, who was still quite pale. "I want to know your opinion on what might have happened. Don't get me wrong, I am not accusing you. I checked those railings myself, and I had them inspected, they were perfectly sound. But what could someone do to change that?"

Bill looked between her and Wes. It seemed clear that he didn't want to voice an opinion.

"Bill, I'm not going to sue you," Suzie said with a frown. "I'm just trying to figure out what might have actually happened on that balcony. I need your help to do that."

"We tried to make the railings match the buildings history as much as possible, but I can tell you for sure that the railing was sound when it was built," Bill explained. "If you want me to tell you that it could have gotten weak with weather or the elements in such a short period of time, that's not possible. I only use quality wood and it is fully sealed. There is no chance that the wood could have rotted or even been damaged by high winds."

"Then how did it magically break?" Wes demanded. He shot a brief glance in Suzie's direction, perhaps to see if she was going to attack him for speaking. Suzie only stared at Bill, waiting for an answer.

"Look, I haven't seen the railing in question, and before you ask, I can't see it," he said firmly. "If I go out there to inspect it, it will be like admitting fault. Suzie, I know that you have no interest in

suing me, but that can change. You have to understand, I could lose my business, I could lose everything over this."

"And so could I," Suzie pointed out. "So, I do understand. But hypothetically, let's say there was no visible damage to the wood. There were no wood shavings, no cracks, nothing to indicate it was cut in any way. What else would cause it to give way?"

Bill frowned. He stared down at the top of his desk for a few moments. When he looked back up at Suzie he spoke carefully.

"If I were in a situation where I had a railing fail like that, I would consider counting the screws to ensure that none were missing. Each screw is important to the strength of the railing, even just a few missing can mean the difference between a solid structure and a weak structure."

"Thank you," Suzie said with a sigh of relief. She didn't recall seeing any screws missing, but she also didn't look. "I appreciate your help, Bill. I want you to know, that even though you might not be able to trust my assurance, I will not be suing you or your company. I know that you still have to protect yourself from potential lawsuits by the family of the victim, so I won't ask you anything else about this. However, please know that I am trying my hardest to figure out what actually happened."

"Good," Bill nodded and offered her his hand for a quick shake. "It is a terrible tragedy," he said with a slow shake of his head. "If I thought it was possible that my company was responsible for it, I would have shut down operations already."

"I know that," Suzie nodded. She passed a quick look over at Wes. "Detective Brown, please stop questioning this man."

"I was only trying to help," Wes said fretfully. Suzie turned and walked out of the office. Wes followed after her. "Suzie wait," he called out and followed her to her car.

"What is it?" she asked testily. She refused to look directly at him. She was still angry with him for upsetting Mary.

"I just want to know what is going on here," he demanded. "Why are you acting so upset with me?"

"I'm not," she replied with a bit of a grimace. She didn't want Mary upset with her for confronting Wes.

"I think you are," he growled in return. "But if you don't tell me, then fine. Would you like help looking at the railing? I could come back with you to do that."

"No, thank you," Suzie said grimly. "I can handle things on my

own. Please leave Bill Daub alone. He is a good man, otherwise I wouldn't have trusted him with the updates on the balconies. This was no accident, and I plan to prove that."

"If there's anything I can do to help, just let me know," he offered.

"Thank you," Suzie said but she had no warmth in her voice as she opened the door. She had no intention of asking him for help, she was still very angry with him. Wes stared after her as she drove off out of the parking lot. She was fuming as she raced back towards Dune House. She wanted to talk to Wes about Mary, but she knew she couldn't because it wasn't what Mary wanted.

Suzie had just pulled into the driveway of Dune House when her cell phone rang. When she saw who was calling she grimaced. She had forgotten all about Louis.

"Hi Louis," she said when she answered.

"Suzie, are you coming to pick me up?" Louis asked.

"Oh, Louis I'm so sorry," Suzie said with a shake of her head. "I got distracted with some things at Dune House. I'll be there shortly."

"Why don't you pick me up at home?" Louis suggested. "I have a few things I can get done while I'm waiting."

"Okay, text me your address and I'll be there in thirty minutes," Suzie said quickly.

"Will do," Louis replied before hanging up the phone.

Suzie hurried into the house. She wanted to check the balcony once more. As she walked towards the stairs she called out to see if Mary was home.

"Mary?" she asked. She caught a glimpse of her friend outside on the deck, but she decided to investigate the balcony before talking to her. She wanted a little time to herself. When she walked

out onto the balcony she cautiously walked to the broken railing. She searched for the points where it should have been attached to the balcony. Just as the police had found, there was no damage, no indication that the wood had been splintered, or that anything had been used to pry it apart. She swung the railing into its proper position. She lined it up with the edge of the balcony where it should have connected. It fitted snugly into place. Then she crouched down to take a closer look at the way it was supposed to connect.

Although, most of the screws were accounted for, there were at least four that were missing. They were the screws at the base of the structure, the ones that should have provided the most support. If the screws had been removed, and the remainder loosened, maybe the railing would have easily given way. If the police had noticed the missing screws they had likely assumed that they had fallen off when the railing came loose. Suzie guessed it was still a possibility that it happened accidently, but she strongly believed it had been tampered with.

“What a good plan,” Suzie muttered to herself. “If he only touched the screws with a screwdriver, never with his fingertips he would have left no trace of his identity, and no evidence of tampering.”

She tore herself away from the balcony and walked back down the stairs to the lobby. Mary was there, with her phone in her hand. She looked up at Suzie.

“What did you do?” she asked as Suzie walked towards her.

“What do you mean?” Suzie asked in return. She was puzzled.

“I mean, I just got off the phone with Wes, he said that he had a very interesting encounter with you today,” she said and locked eyes with Suzie.

“Well, I didn't say how angry I was with him,” Suzie said defensively. “That should count for something.”

“Suzie,” Mary said with a slight frown. “I know that you're just trying to protect me, but you really have to let me handle things with Wes.”

“I'm sorry, I tried not to show him that I was upset with him,” Suzie frowned. “I didn't mean to cause a problem.”

“I don't think you did,” she replied with a smile. “It means a lot to me that you care so much. But I think Wes was a little frightened of you,” she giggled.

“He should be,” Suzie replied and narrowed her eyes. “He should be very frightened.”

“I love you, Suzie,” Mary said and gave her a tight hug.

“I love you, too,” Suzie said. “I hope that you can figure things out with Wes. But he needs to stop treating you badly.”

“I don't know,” Mary sighed. “Maybe I was just overreacting. I can be a little sensitive because of how things were with Kent.”

“I understand,” Suzie nodded. “I'm headed out, do you need anything?”

“Where are you going?” Mary asked. Suzie was about to tell her, but she stopped herself before she could. She didn't want Mary to get in the middle of things. She had enough on her plate with her birthday and Wes’ behavior.

“Just to grab a few things at the store,” Suzie explained.

“Oh okay,” Mary nodded. “No I don't need anything. I'll see you later tonight.”

“Absolutely,” Suzie replied.

Suzie rushed back to her car. Now that she had her suspicions of how the railing had been sabotaged, she also knew that there would never be evidence to show that was what had happened, unless she could get a full confession out of the murderer. Her assumption of what had happened would not be enough to protect Dune House from a lawsuit. She had nothing to show that could prove that the balcony was tampered with. As she started her car and drove off, Suzie felt a little bad for not being honest with Mary, but it was only for her protection. She didn't want Mary even more stressed out with her birthday coming up.

Suzie drove towards Louis' house. She had never been to it before, but the town of Garber was very easy to drive through. It was essentially a peninsula and had two main roads. When she found the street Louis' house was on she turned and slowed down to watch for the house numbers. The street was quiet with similar medium-sized houses. Suzie pulled up to Louis' house and parked behind his small orange beetle. She climbed out of the car and walked up to the front door. He opened it before she even had the chance to knock.

“I've been waiting for you,” he explained. “But I just need to run to the bathroom, come in for a second will you?”

Suzie hesitated for a moment. She liked Louis just fine when he worked in the library, but she had never really gotten to know him

very well. She had been in Garber for a short time, so other than Mary and Paul she felt like she really didn't know anyone in town that well, not even her cousin who she had recently met again after decades of no contact.

"Sure," she nodded a little and stepped just inside the door. Louis rushed down the hall, presumably to the bathroom. Suzie thought his house looked exactly as she would expect it to be. His furniture was neat, his carpet clean, the shelves on the walls were filled from end to end with books. She didn't see a television anywhere in the living room, but there was a fireplace. On the mantle of the fireplace was a book. Suzie guessed it was the one he was currently reading. Curious, she stepped closer to check the title. It was a civil war documentary, not something she was terribly interested in. However, something did catch her eye. There were a few photographs on the mantle. One in particular held her attention. It had three people in it. Louis, an older man, and someone who looked very familiar.

"Suzie?" Louis asked from just behind her, causing her to jump. "Are you ready to go?"

"Who is this, Louis?" Suzie asked as she pointed to the photograph.

"Oh, that's Richard," Louis sighed sadly. "The one who gave me the book."

"And the man beside him?" she asked.

"That's his son, Gerald," Louis nodded a little. "He's the one we're going to see today."

"Are you sure that his name is Gerald?" she asked as she looked from the picture back to Louis.

"Of course I'm sure," he said. He offered her a puzzled look. "Why do you ask?"

"Because he looks exactly like a man who checked into Dune House the same night that Warren Blasser did," Suzie said gravely. "He said his name was John."

"Are you serious?" Louis asked. "Do you think it was Gerald? Do you think he killed Warren?"

"I honestly don't know," Suzie said with a slow shake of her head. "He checked out the next morning."

"Well, we're going to see him, now," Louis said hesitantly. "What do you think we should do?"

"I'm sure he'll recognize me if I go in there with you," Suzie

frowned. “I don't think you should be alone with him, Louis. He could be a killer.”

“I'm not afraid of Gerald,” Louis almost laughed. “Trust me, he's not intimidating at all.”

Suzie frowned. She knew that she had to let Louis make his own choices. She felt like she was getting a little too controlling.

“Just remember, even if he doesn't seem frightening, if he did this, then he is a murderer,” she reminded him.

“I really don't think he could kill anyone,” Louis shook his head. “But I'll be careful, I promise.”

“We'll take my car,” Suzie suggested.

“Fine,” Louis agreed and followed her out the door.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

Once Suzie and Louis were in the car Suzie felt a little awkward. She and Louis didn't know each other very well, yet she was taking a bit of a road trip with him. She backed down the driveway and started to drive down the street.

“No, it's the other way,” Louis insisted.

“Oops,” Suzie nodded and turned around to drive down the road in the opposite direction.

“I still can't believe that Gerald would do this,” Louis shook his head. “He was always such a sniveling kid. When he was a teenager I didn't think he was ever going to mature.”

“I can't believe I never considered him. He checked in before Warren though. Did you let him know that Warren was coming out to value the book?” Suzie asked.

Louis cringed and glanced over at her. “Oh no, I did,” he admitted sadly. “I called him, just to let him know that it was going to be inspected. It just seemed right to let him know. He asked me about the valuer and I assured him he was one of the best. Is this my fault?” he asked with a soft gasp.

“No,” Suzie said firmly. “The only one at fault here is the murderer who did this. It was not your fault, Louis,” Suzie said with sympathy in her voice. “But it also doesn't make sense, does it?” Suzie asked. “Why would Gerald go to all the trouble of murdering Warren when he didn't even have the book?”

“Maybe he didn't know,” Louis said quietly. “Maybe he thought that Warren had the book. Then when he didn't find it in his possession, he came looking for it at my house.”

“But why?” Suzie asked again. “Do you really think this could all be over simple jealousy?”

Louis sighed and leaned back in the seat. “I'm not terribly close

with my family, what there is of it," he explained quietly. "When it comes to a father and son, I don't think there is anything simple about jealousy. Maybe Gerald had more animosity towards me than I ever realized. Perhaps I should have paid closer attention to him."

"Louis, again, you can't blame yourself," Suzie insisted and turned down the street that Gerald's house was on. "I still think it isn't a good idea for you to go in there alone."

"It might not be," Louis admitted. "But I do think that this is partially my fault. Maybe if I had been kinder to Gerald none of this would have happened. I just want the chance to see him face to face, to talk to him about it."

"I'll be right outside," Suzie said and looked at him with concern. "If anything goes wrong, just shout for me."

"And you'll come in blazing?" Louis asked with a laugh. He swept his gaze over Suzie's slender form.

"Don't underestimate me, Louis," Suzie warned. "I've taken down much larger men when needed."

"I feel safer already," Louis said teasingly. Suzie opened her mouth to argue, but she changed her mind at the last moment. She didn't want to get involved in an argument when Louis was about to go into a dangerous situation. "I'll be fine," he promised her before walking up the sidewalk towards the house. Louis paused in front of the front door and took a breath. Then he knocked firmly on the door. He stood there for a few minutes. Then he knocked firmly again. Louis glanced over his shoulder towards Suzie, who was still sitting in the car. Suzie looked around the driveway. There was a car parked in it, but maybe it was an extra car, or maybe Gerald had gone for a walk. Louis knocked one last time and then began walking back towards her. Suzie opened her door and stepped out of the car.

"I guess he isn't home," Louis said with some disappointment.

"Maybe we should take a look through the windows," Suzie suggested.

"Do you think he'd be foolish enough to leave the book laying out in plain sight?" Louis asked skeptically.

"Well, we're here, and he's not, it might be our only chance to sneak a peek," Suzie pointed out. She began walking towards the house. Louis followed after her. Suzie walked up to the front window. There was a curtain drawn closed. She could see light filtering through. She tried to see through the narrow crack in the

curtain but she couldn't make anything out.

“You go that way, I'll go this way,” she hissed at Louis. Louis nodded and began walking around the opposite side of the house. Suzie reached a window that appeared to look into a study. There were blinds hanging in the window, but they were open. She could clearly see a table with a laptop on it, and two books beside it. Suzie blinked a few times. She wondered if her blood pressure might have gotten a little too high. She felt as if she was seeing double. When she looked through the window again, she saw the identical books in the same position on a wooden desk.

“Louis!” she called out in a loud whisper. Louis had already walked around the side of the back of the house, he was walking towards Suzie.

“I thought you said that the book was one of a kind?” she asked as she looked over at Louis. Louis looked at her with a puzzled expression.

“It is one of a kind,” he said firmly. “Why?”

“Because I see two,” Suzie replied and pointed at the window. Louis walked quietly over. He peered through the window at the books on the desk.

“Oh no,” he moaned and shook his head. “Gerald must have had a copy made.”

“So, which one is real?” Suzie asked with confusion.

“I won’t know until I can look at them properly,” Louis said and shook his head. “I can't believe he did this.”

“We should call Jason and let him know what we found,” Suzie said. “Maybe it will be enough for him to get a warrant so he can search the house for evidence of the murder.”

“No, don't do that,” Louis said with urgency.

“What? Why?” Suzie asked.

“Because, if Gerald is tipped off that we know about the books he might get spooked and hide them. This might be my only chance to get my book back, Suzie,” he frowned. “I know it isn't right, but he stole it first.”

“What are you saying?” Suzie asked with concern.

“I'm saying I'm going to go in there and steal it back,” Louis explained and tried to open the window. He smiled a little when he found that it wasn't locked.

“Louis wait, you can't go in there alone,” Suzie said. Then she tilted her head towards the houses nearby. “Besides, someone might

see you."

"I didn't really think about that," Louis sighed. "I'm not thinking about anything to be honest. I just want my book back."

"I understand," Suzie said. "We might be able to use it as proof once we get it back," she frowned. "It'll be dark soon, let's wait just a little while. If Gerald doesn't come home, then we'll go in and get the book."

"Good plan," Louis said. "Any chance you have something to eat in the car?" he asked hopefully. "I'm starving."

"I have some granola bars," Suzie nodded. When they returned to the car she handed him a granola bar, and then opened one for herself. As she took a bite of the granola bar a few pieces of it crumbled onto her lap. She brushed them away onto the floor of the car. When she did she recalled the pistachio shells that had been on the balcony. She also remembered that they hadn't found any kind of wrapper from the bag of pistachios. Not in the trash can, not on the balcony, not in the sand below. Her mind was lingering on this, when Louis lightly tapped the dashboard.

"I think it's dark enough now," he said.

The sun had just set and there was still a glow in the sky, but Suzie agreed with him. If they waited much longer, Gerald might arrive home, and then their only chance of recovering the book and proving that he was the thief would be lost.

"Okay, let's do it," Suzie agreed. They quietly crept out of the car. Gerald hadn't come home, so Suzie hoped they would have time to get into the house and back out with the book before he did. They moved stealthily around the side of the house. Suzie and Louis pushed up on the window together until it was high enough for them to crawl through. Suzie held the window up while Louis crawled in, then he did the same for her. Once they were both inside, Suzie turned towards the table where the books had been. Her heart dropped when she saw that the books and the computer were gone. Louis was staring at the same empty table.

"How is that possible?" he asked Suzie in a whisper.

"Maybe we came in the wrong room?" Suzie frowned. She knew that wasn't likely. This was the study she had been looking into earlier. Now it was skewed by darkness, but it was the same room. Suddenly she came to an uneasy realization. Before she could voice it, she heard a noise in the hallway. Then in the darkness, Suzie could see a light flick on underneath the door of the study.

“Louis,” she hissed. “Someone is in the hallway.”

Louis started moving towards the window they had crawled in, but he knocked over a lamp along the way. The lamp crashed to the floor.

Suzie froze. She was certain that they were about to get caught. She noticed a coat hanging on the hat rack a few feet from her. With nothing to lose, she ducked under the coat hoping that it would shield her. Louis dove down behind the couch.

“Who is in there?” Gerald demanded from the dark hallway.

Suzie cringed. This man was a potential murderer, at the very least a burglar. She held her breath as she waited to see if he would open the door to the study. As she expected, she heard the click of the knob being turned. She heard the creak of the door slowly swinging open. She could hide and wait for him to find her, or she could try to take him by surprise. She abruptly flung the coat off her and shouted, “We know what you did, Gerald!”

Gerald gasped and jumped backwards. The coat tangled around his feet, causing him to stumble. When he reached for the wall to catch himself he missed completely and fell backwards with a crash. Suzie and Louis started to run past him.

“Wait, wait please,” Gerald cried out from the floor. “My back,” he moaned.

Suzie slowed to a stop. Louis turned back to look at Gerald.

“See, I told you,” he said to Suzie. He sighed and reached down to offer Gerald a hand up. Suzie was not nearly as trusting. She stood back as she watched Louis help Gerald to his feet.

“Louis?” Gerald asked tearfully. “Why would you do this to me?”

“Why would I do this to you?” Louis said in exasperation. “You're the one that broke into my house and stole my book!”

“Are you also responsible for the murder of Warren Blasser?” Suzie asked.

“No!” Gerald said sternly. “All right listen,” he took a deep breath and then sighed. “I am guilty of one thing. When my father told me he intended to leave the book to you, Louis, I was jealous, and greedy. I wanted to keep it. So, I spoke to my contacts and I had a forger copy the book. I figured you would never know the difference as I knew you would never try to sell it, so I didn't see how anyone would get hurt,” he shook his head. “It was stupid, I know that now.”

“Then why did you pretend to be someone else when you stayed at Dune House?” Suzie demanded. “The very same place that Warren Blasser stayed at the same time and where he was killed.”

“Please no,” Gerald shook his head and looked pleadingly at Louis. “Let me explain,” he said quickly. “I didn't even know that man was staying there. When Louis told me that Warren was coming out to value the book, I freaked out. I knew that he would be able to tell that it was a fake. I called Larry, the guy I got to forge a copy. He told me that I better take care of the problem, that he had just been released from jail and he didn’t want to go back there. He said all I needed to do was switch the books if I didn't want to end up in jail. So, I stayed at Dune House and planned to break in to Louis' house that night. I was just going to switch the books, so that he would have the real one, and that would be the end of it. But I chickened out when I realized Warren was staying there as well. I called Larry again to tell him that it was too late, he said not to worry, and that he would take care of it. I thought that meant he would steal the book,” his eyes filled with tears as he shook his head. “You have to understand, I don't think like a criminal. When I found out that Warren was dead, I was really scared. I knew that it could all come back on me, especially if the book was found to be a fake. I tried to call Larry but he wouldn't answer. So, I broke into Louis' house to swap the books over.”

“Likely story,” Suzie said as she crossed her arms. “I almost believe you. Except for the fact that you have both books.”

“I didn't mean to,” Gerald gasped out. “I was going to switch them, but I heard a noise, and I panicked. I had put both books down on a table, and I couldn't tell which was real and which wasn't. My mind was spinning. So, I just grabbed both of them and took off.”

“Oh, Gerald,” Louis said and ran his fingertips across his forehead. “This is insane.”

“But it sounds true,” Suzie admitted as she shook her head. “So, you didn't kill Warren?”

“No!” Gerald nearly shouted. “I would never kill anyone! Here,” he said and walked over to a painting on the wall. He lifted the painting to reveal a safe. He opened the safe and took out the book.

“How do we know that it's the right one?” Louis asked skeptically.

“Check the stitching,” Suzie said. “Warren had it circled on the

pictures that you sent him. Maybe he had already figured out it was a fake."

Louis ran his fingertips along the spine of the book and then nodded. "You're right it is different. This is the real copy."

"See?" Gerald said helplessly. "I screwed up, Louis, I'm not going to lie. I was expecting to inherit everything from my father. But I tried to fix things in the end."

"So, that you wouldn't go to jail," Louis accused.

"And with the help of a criminal, a good man ended up dead," Suzie said.

"I know, I know," Gerald said and hung his head. "When I saw you two knocking on the door earlier I was afraid you had figured out everything, that's why I pretended that I wasn't home. Are you going to call the police?"

Louis met Suzie's eyes.

"We should," Suzie said.

"He recently lost his father," Louis pointed out. "He didn't kill Warren."

"But he still stole from you, and broke into your house…"

"Just like we just did," Louis reminded her. "I think we should try to keep Gerald's name out of this as much as possible. It's what Richard would have wanted."

"All right," Suzie frowned. "But only if you give us all of the information that you have about this forger you used."

"All I know is his name and cell phone number," he said and shook his head.

"What about places you met?" Suzie suggested. "Was there anywhere that you exchanged money or met to talk?"

"Yes," Gerald nodded. "A dive bar, Smokies, on 5th and Terrace in Parish. We met there a few times," he nodded. "The bartender seemed to know him fairly well, always got out some nuts for him when we arrived."

"Okay good," Suzie nodded. "We can keep your name out of this for now, Gerald, but I suggest you hire yourself a good lawyer."

"Here's Larry's number," Gerald said and jotted down the phone number. "Please, please, believe me. I would never kill anyone."

"I do believe you," Louis said and shook his head. "Gerald, I know that your father taught you better than this."

"I know he did," Gerald nodded. "I know it. I'm going to try to do better by him."

As they left Gerald's house it was hard for Suzie to resist calling Jason. She wanted him to know what had happened, and that there was even more reason to believe that Warren had indeed been murdered. But she had made an agreement with Louis about trying to keep Gerald out of it, and she wasn't going to back out on it.

“Let's find this bar,” Suzie said. “Do you have any idea how to get there?”

“Yes, it's not too far,” Louis said. “But do you really think he'll be there?”

“He thinks he's gotten away with murder, he has no reason to hide out,” Suzie frowned.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12

Suzie and Louis drove towards Smokies. She took the directions that Louis gave her. Within twenty minutes they were outside of Smokies. As Suzie parked, something caught her eye. There was a dusty mustard colored car in the parking lot.

“Louis! That's the car I saw outside Dune House the night that Warren Blasser checked in,” Suzie said with excitement in her voice. “It must be Larry's car!”

“I don't think that there could be two cars that ugly,” Louis said as he frowned. They stepped inside the bar, which lived up to its name. It was filled with billowing smoke. Suzie scrunched up her nose. She was fairly certain that smoking was banned in most bars now, but that didn't seem to matter to the patrons at Smokies. Suzie walked up to the bar and glanced at the few customers that were seated on bar stools. She spotted one man steadily shelling nuts and popping them into his mouth.

“Larry?” Suzie asked as she locked eyes on him. Larry started to jump up off the bar stool but before he could, Louis was standing on the other side of him.

“Relax Larry, we just want to talk,” Louis said with a slight frown.

“I've got nothing to talk about,” Larry said with a slow shake of his head.

“Maybe you would like to talk about Warren Blasser?” Suzie suggested. Larry popped another nut into his mouth.

“I have no idea who that is,” he shrugged.

“I don't believe you,” Suzie said.

“And?” Larry sneered. “I don't have to prove myself to you.”

“You will have to prove yourself to the police,” Suzie shot back.

“Police?” Larry said with a deep laugh. “I don't see any police

here. Do you?"

Suzie grimaced. She knew that Larry was right. She did not have enough proof to get Jason to arrest this man.

"You're not going to get away with this, Larry," Suzie said firmly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Larry scowled. "You're crazy."

"So, you didn't forge a copy of a very rare and expensive book?" Louis asked.

"Oh, fans of my artwork," Larry nodded a little. "Well, I can't say if I did or I didn't, but I can say, you've got nothing on me. If you don't mind, I'm trying to enjoy my beer."

"You listen to me, Larry," Suzie said and leaned towards him.

The bar tender wiped a rag across the bar top in front of her.

"Lady, if you and your boyfriend ain't buying, you need to get out," he said sharply. Suzie sighed and backed away from Larry. The last thing she wanted to do was support a bar that harbored criminals and cigarette smoke and in addition she didn't think she was going to get anywhere with Larry.

Just as Suzie was turning to leave she heard a familiar voice. Her gaze shifted to a booth. There, to her surprise sat Detective Brown. Her voice caught in her throat. She was tempted to alert him that she had seen him, to question him, or to demand that he help with the investigation, but she remembered what Mary had said. She didn't have a right to interfere. Detective Brown leaned forward to talk to the person in a trench coat across from him. Suzie couldn't hear what he was saying.

"Out, now," the bartender said again and pointed towards the door.

"We better go, Suzie," Louis said gravely.

"Fine," Suzie nodded. As they left the bar, she wrote down the license plate number from the back of Larry's car. She was silent as she drove Louis back to his house.

"Do you want to come in for a minute?" Louis offered. "We could talk about what we've found out so far."

Suzie nodded a little. She wasn't ready to face Mary yet after what she had seen.

Once she was settled in Louis' living room he handed her a bottle of water.

"So, what did you think of Larry?" he asked.

Suzie sighed. “I think he must have murdered Warren, but how are we going to prove it?” she shook her head. “I just feel like we’re getting nowhere with this,” Suzie admitted.

Louis had opened his laptop and was tapping lightly on his keyboard.

“We did get the book back,” he pointed out.

“I know,” Suzie admitted. “Which is a good thing. But can we really let Warren be buried with people believing that his death was an accident?”

“Unfortunately, we don't have any proof of Larry's involvement, if it was even Larry,” Louis pointed out. “Just because you saw a car similar to his at Dune House, that doesn't make him a murderer. We still have no idea how he did it, or why he would have done it.”

“Well, we know that he's a forger, that he may have been trying to protect himself from getting caught,” Suzie pointed out.

“But he didn't need to go to the extreme of killing Warren,” Louis stated. “Besides that, he didn't have the book. It was at my house. So, even if he killed Warren that wouldn't solve the problem of him not getting caught. Some other valuer would have detected the fraud.”

“You may be right about that,” Suzie said softly. “There doesn't seem to be a motive for Larry to kill Warren.”

“So, there you go,” Louis shrugged.

“No,” Suzie shook her head. “That's not what I meant. What I meant was there must have been a reason. Maybe that's what we're missing. Maybe there was some kind of personal connection between Warren and Larry. Something that would make Larry more prone to commit murder than just the fact that there was a fraudulent book.”

“Hmm, but what?” Louis shook his head. “I can't see their paths crossing for any reason.”

“Wait,” Suzie snapped her fingers. “Larry had just gotten out of jail right?”

“Yes,” Louis nodded. “I believe that is what Gerald mentioned.”

“What was he in jail for?” Suzie asked. “Can you look it up on the computer and find out?”

“Sure,” Louis nodded. He spent a few minutes typing things into the computer. Suzie's mind was slowly churning. She was beginning to formulate a theory.

“Looks like he did five years for fraud,” Louis said quietly. “It

doesn't say what type of fraud."

"Okay," Suzie said. "That makes sense, as we know that he is a forger. But we also know that he's very good. So, how did he get caught? Does it list the witnesses who testified against him?"

Louis typed some more information into the computer. Suzie leaned forward so that she could see the results as well when they came up. "Anything?" she asked.

"Absolutely," Louis said. "One of the star witnesses was Warren Blasser. He proved that the antique that Larry had been trying to pass off as a priceless object was in fact a very well designed copy."

"There you go," Suzie said and smiled as she sat back in her chair. "A personal connection. So, like Gerald said, he hired him to forge a copy of the book that his father intended to pass down to you. Once that was done he switched the books, which his father was not aware of in his ill state. So, I think that the book that you received was always the copy," Suzie explained.

"That makes sense," Louis grimaced. "Though, I hate to admit that I didn't realize it wasn't the original."

"You would have no reason to suspect it, Louis," Suzie pointed out. "You trusted Richard. You knew he would never give you a copy. It was really the perfect crime, until you told Gerald that Warren Blasser was coming to town to value the book. Then he called Larry in a panic. Larry gave him the plan to steal the copy and replace it with the genuine book. Then Larry found out it was Warren Blasser that was coming to town. He knew that Gerald might not follow through. He knew that Warren would see through his work, as he had in the past, and send him back to prison. So, rather than risk it, and perhaps to get a little revenge, he attacked Warren before he could ever even see the book."

"Wow," Louis shook his head. "If that's all true, then how did he kill Warren?"

"That is still a mystery," Suzie admitted. "I don't know how he could have done it. Maybe Gerald helped him?"

"I still don't think he was involved," Louis said. "He's a weasel, there's no question about that, but a murderer?"

"You may be right," Suzie said. "I think the key here is Larry. He obviously had the most to lose if Warren had lived. Maybe he didn't care if another valuer looked at the book, as long as it wasn't Warren."

"But we still have no proof," Louis pointed out. "We can't prove

that it was Larry's car at Dune House. We can't prove that he was ever even there. We can't even prove that he was involved in the forgery unless we can get Gerald to admit to the police that he hired him."

"Which I doubt he will do," Suzie agreed. "I think the only thing that we can do is go to Larry's house. Maybe there will be proof there. Or maybe if we talk to him, he will slip up about what he has done."

"Maybe, but I still don't think it's a good idea to confront him," Louis said grimly. "We're talking about a hardened criminal here, Suzie, a killer."

"I know that," Suzie said in return. "But if we don't find something to implicate him, he's going to get away with it. That's not something I can stand happening. If you don't want to be involved, Louis, I understand."

"There is no way you're going anywhere without me," Louis said sternly. "I may not be the bravest man in the world, I may not be the most muscular, but I'm not about to run away from a dangerous situation. I just think we should go to the police with what we have, just so they know what we're up to."

"We can't," Suzie said gravely. "If Jason finds out that I still have my nose in all of this, he is not going to be happy. Trust me."

"All right," Louis nodded. "Then we'll go on our own."

"Can you find his address?" Suzie asked.

"I already have it," Louis said as he hit the button on his keyboard to print the document on his screen.

"Great," Suzie nodded. "Then we should go as soon as possible, before he has the chance to skip town."

"I'm ready when you're ready," Louis said and snatched the paper out of the printer.

"In the morning," Suzie said. "I'm exhausted, you're exhausted, and I feel better about doing this in daylight."

"Okay," Louis agreed. "Are you okay to get home?"

"Yes," Suzie nodded. "Louis, will you pick me up at Dune House at seven tomorrow morning, that way Mary can have the car if she needs it. We'll head straight out to Larry's house."

"You got it," Louis nodded.

On her drive home Suzie had a hard time staying focused on the road. She glanced in her rearview mirror and realized all of the party decorations she had bought were still in the backseat. She sighed and parked in the parking lot of Dune House. Everything looked dark, so she assumed that Mary was sleeping. She grabbed the bags from the back seat and headed inside. She was walking down the hallway when Mary flicked the hall light on.

“Where have you been, young lady?” she asked.

“Shopping,” Suzie said and hid the bags behind her back.

“Oh, I see,” Mary said with a sly smile. “Keeping secrets?”

“Only good ones,” Suzie replied. “Now off to bed with you, before you ruin the surprise.”

“All right, just remember, I'm not that fond of surprises,” Mary warned her. Suzie tried not to grimace. She wondered for a moment if the party was a bad idea altogether. Once Mary had headed back to her room, Suzie hurried into her room and tucked the bags into her closet. Then she collapsed onto her bed. All of the running around really had left her exhausted. But as she tried to sleep her mind kept filling with Larry's laughter. They might not have any proof, but she was sure that he was the killer. When she finally fell asleep she dreamed about pistachios.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

First thing in the morning Suzie slipped out of Dune House. She didn't wait to see if Mary was awake. Mary might ask too many questions, and Suzie might not be able to lie well enough to her. She didn't want to risk Mary finding out that she intended to confront a murder suspect, or risk the possibility that Mary would follow after her. Louis was waiting in the driveway.

“Suzie?” she heard Mary call out as she reached his car. She was standing on the front porch still in her nightgown.

“I'm just going into town for a little bit with Louis,” Suzie waved to Mary.

“Okay,” Mary called back. She narrowed her eyes and then hurried back into Dune House. Suzie hoped that she wasn't upset with her. When she got in the car, Louis had already stopped for coffee and muffins.

“Thank you so much,” she said as he handed her a coffee. He settled into the passenger seat.

“Hey, we can't confront a killer on an empty stomach,” Louis said grimly. “Hopefully we can get him to confess something incriminating,” he added quietly.

“Hopefully,” Suzie nodded as she had a sip of her coffee.

“If only we knew something that might connect him to the crime.”

“I think I might,” Suzie replied in a murmur.

“What is it?” Louis asked eagerly.

“I'll let you know when I find out if I’m right.”

As they drove to Larry's house they were both fairly silent aside from slurping coffee and munching on the muffins. Suzie knew that Louis wasn't used to this kind of activity, in truth she wasn't used to it either, not any more. She had become much more used to

renovating and decorating than investigating.

They parked a short distance from the driveway that led up to Larry's house. The driveway was empty when they arrived.

“Now what?” Louis asked.

“Now, we wait,” Suzie replied with determination. “Let's get closer,” she suggested.

The two left the car behind and walked to the end of the driveway. It was a corner lot that backed up to the woods, so there was a good amount of brush surrounding the driveway. Suzie and Louis crouched down behind it. Not a minute later they heard the rumbling of an engine.

“Is that him?” Louis asked and tried to stick his head out.

“He's pulling in now,” Suzie said and tugged Louis back into the bushes beside the entrance of the driveway.

“What are we going to do?” Louis asked with fear rising quickly in his voice. “He'll see us!”

“Shh,” Suzie insisted. “He won't see us if you quiet down and stay down,” she whispered. Louis tightened his lips and lowered his head. The car rumbled past them and up towards the house. The engine turned off. Suzie heard the squeak of the car door as it slowly opened. She closed her eyes for a moment and wondered if it was worth the calculated risk that she was about to take. She could hear the car door beginning to close once more. She knew that once Larry made it into the house, he would have the upper hand. She had to make her move before it was too late.

“Stay here,” she hissed at Louis.

“What are you talking about?” he demanded. Without answering she stepped out from behind the bushes.

Larry was just about to slam the door shut when Suzie called out to him. “Larry? Do you have a moment?”

He froze, the door still slightly open. Then he looked slowly over his shoulder.

“What are you doing here?” he asked gruffly.

“I'm sorry, I know this must seem strange to you. When we were at the bar the other day, I noticed that you were enjoying those pistachios so much. I was wondering if you knew where to find some, not just the run of the mill pistachios, but the best pistachios,” she said with a soft laugh.

“What are you talking about?” Larry demanded with irritation. “You stalked me, you followed me all of the way to my house, over

pistachios?" he glared fiercely at her. "You need to get off my property before I call the police!"

"Would you, Larry?" she asked as she moved between him and the house. "Because I am here about the pistachios. I think the police would be very interested in the pistachios as well."

"Have you lost your mind?" he asked sharply. "Why would the police be interested in pistachios?"

"Perhaps they would be interested in the pistachio shells that were found on the balcony that Warren Blasser stood on just before he died," Suzie suggested. All of a sudden Larry's expression grew as hard as rock.

"What did you just say to me?" he asked in a wicked voice.

"You heard me," Suzie replied daringly. "Is that what you used to coax him out of his room?" she pressed. "Did you throw your pistachio shells up against the window of his room until he stepped out onto the balcony?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he shook his head. "You are truly mental."

"I don't think so," Suzie said grimly. "I also think when the police test the DNA on those pistachio shells, they're not going to find Warren's. They're going to find yours."

"Why would they test them?" Larry laughed. "It was an accident. A terrible tragedy that occurred because of your negligence. Isn't that what everyone believes?"

"You forget one very important factor in all of this, Larry. My cousin, Jason, is on the Garber police force. All I have to do is ask him to test those pistachios and he will make it happen," Suzie locked eyes with Larry to show him that she was not frightened by him.

"Oh, the Garber police?" Larry asked with mock fear in his voice. "How terrifying," he rolled his eyes. "You need to move on before you get yourself hurt."

"I'm not the one who is going to be hurt," Suzie said as she narrowed her eyes. "You murdered a man on my property, and you have to pay for that."

"I didn't do it, and you can't prove I did," Larry nearly shouted back. "You don't have any pistachio shells with my DNA. I'm not stupid. I'm an artist," he growled.

"An artist that has gone to prison for his crimes," Suzie challenged. "That's where you're going back to."

“I will never go to prison again,” Larry abruptly roared. His dominant demeanor suddenly became violent as he jerked the door of his car open. Suzie heard the squeak of the door and saw Larry's hand reach into the vehicle for something. She was too startled to do anything to defend herself. She could only watch as he moved swiftly. When he stood back up again he had something in his hand. Suzie was sure it was a weapon. “You should have walked away when I gave you the chance,” he shouted. “Now, you're going to have to be another unexplained fatality.”

Suzie started to take a step back. She heard a twig snap, and expected that Louis had come out from behind the bushes in an attempt to protect her. But before she could create distance between herself and Larry he had his arm around her waist. He jerked her body back hard against his and pinned her there. Suzie could barely breathe as his arm across her stomach was so tight. Then she felt a cold, hard object pressed against the side of her neck.

“Don't take another step,” he growled. Suzie saw Louis standing a few feet away from them, his eyes filled with fear.

“Suzie, don't move,” Louis said as he froze where he stood. Suzie's heart began pounding. She didn't know exactly what was pressing against her neck but she could feel a point and knew that it had to be made out of metal. Her stomach churned as she wondered if these would be the last moments of her life.

“Get down,” Larry commanded Louis.

Louis slowly sank to his knees in the dirt driveway, his eyes locked to Suzie. “Larry, you don't have to do this,” Louis said. “This was all a misunderstanding. Obviously you had nothing to do with Warren Blasser's death. Nobody is going to send you back to prison.”

Suzie cringed as Larry laughed loudly beside her ear. “Oh yes, we'll all just shake hands and become the best of friends, right?” he shook his head. “Wrong.”

Suzie closed her eyes for a moment. She was trying to keep herself calm and her mind clear. She knew that losing focus at that moment would only cause her to make a big mistake.

“Larry, people know we're here,” she lied quietly. No one had any idea they were there. She hadn't even told Paul what she was up to. Jason wouldn't have any idea that she and Louis had decided to take matters into their own hands. They were alone with little hope of escape. “If you do this, you won't be going to prison for

forgery, you'll be going to prison for murder. You were right, we don't have any proof that you killed Warren. But how do you think you're going to hide something like this?"

"You won't have to worry about that," Larry replied with cruel amusement. "You'll be dead."

He jerked her body hard to the right and began pulling her towards the door of the small house. "You too," he said to Louis. "One wrong move and she's a goner."

Louis looked helpless as he watched Larry drag Suzie. Reluctantly, he stood up and followed after them. Suzie knew that Louis was walking to his own demise. He was only cooperating in an attempt to protect her. He could have fled at any moment. She felt such gratitude towards him. She never would have expected that he would try so hard to protect her.

As Larry walked towards the door to the house, Suzie thought of the birthday party she would be missing. She wondered if Mary would be able to run Dune House on her own, or would she give it up to pursue other things? As Larry started to pull her into the house, she thought about Paul. He had pleaded with her to be cautious, and she hadn't listened. She knew that would be no comfort to him. He had been living a solitary life when she first met him. He had reached out of his comfort zone to be with her, she doubted that he would ever do that again. She hated to think of him living the rest of his life alone.

"Larry, please," she whispered. "I've done nothing to you. I've never hurt you, just let us go."

"Not a chance," he barked in her ear. He seemed to be struggling with the door handle. Suzie met eyes with Louis. She held his gaze. When she knew he was paying attention to her and not Larry, she mouthed a word to him.

"Run!"

Louis shook his head slightly. Suzie mouthed it again. She knew that the moment they were all inside the house there would be no chance of either of them surviving. She didn't want Louis to sacrifice himself for her. Louis hesitated again. She closed her eyes for a moment. She felt Larry finally get the door open. She opened her eyes and looked into his eyes.

"Go," she hissed. "Please!"

Louis grimaced, and then abruptly darted towards the edge of the yard.

“Get back here!” Larry shouted. “She's dead now, she's dead!” he said and Suzie felt the tip of whatever weapon he was using digging into the skin of her neck. She felt tears in her eyes. She had hoped that maybe Larry would be so startled by Louis' escape that he would loosen his grip on her, but he didn't. He was shouting and cursing at Louis, but he was still holding Suzie tightly. Suzie knew in the next second they would be in the house. There was no way Louis would be able to get help in time.

“Let her go,” a voice growled from just behind both of them. Suddenly, Suzie realized why Larry was having so much trouble getting into the house. Someone inside the house was holding the door shut.

“Who are you?” Larry growled and tugged Suzie back away from the door.

“It doesn't matter who I am,” the person replied. “All that matters is that I am the one with the gun.”

Suzie gasped at the word. She also recognized the voice. Her eyes filled with tears. She tilted her head to the side so that she could see Mary standing in the doorway. Not only was she glaring at Larry, she was pointing what appeared to be a very real gun directly at him.

“Like you even know how to use it,” Larry chuckled. “Just put the gun down, or this screwdriver goes into her pretty little neck,” Larry threatened. Mary raised an eyebrow. Then she released the safety on the gun. Suzie felt Larry shudder at the subtle click of the safety being released.

“All right, all right,” he mumbled and hesitantly lowered the screwdriver. Suzie felt a brief sense of relief. Then Larry roared and abruptly shoved Suzie directly at Mary, who was still pointing the gun at Larry. Suzie stumbled and fell into Mary's arms. Mary managed to lower the gun before the collision.

Suzie was so startled by being shoved it took her a moment to gain her composure. Suzie glanced around for Larry but it seemed as if he was long gone. “I guess he got away,” she sighed and shook her head. “Mary, I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been here, you saved my life!”

She turned to see a police car screaming into the driveway of the house. Jason nearly tripped as he jumped out of the car before it had come to a complete stop. He had his weapon drawn as he ran towards the two women.

“Are you okay?” he shouted as he skidded to a stop a few feet from them. His partner, Kirk, was running right behind him.

“We're okay,” Suzie said. “But Larry took off into the woods,” she pointed into the woods. Jason lifted his eyes from where Suzie was pointing to Mary, who was still nervously holding the gun in her hand. Jason cautiously moved closer to her.

“Give me that gun, Mary,” he said as calmly as he could. Suzie could hear the tension in his voice.

“It’s not loaded,” Mary said as she offered him the gun carefully. Suzie sighed with relief at the realization that it wasn’t loaded. Jason held the gun and then he turned to Kirk.

“Go after him,” he said tilting his head towards the woods. Kirk's eyes lingered on the gun for a moment, but he slowly nodded. He took off at a fast run into the woods. Suzie continued to hold tightly to Mary.

“Is this your gun, Mary?” Jason asked as he studied her intently.

Mary shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “Not exactly,” she replied hesitantly.

“Mary?” Suzie asked with surprise. “Where did you get it from?”

“I'd rather not say,” Mary replied with a grimace.

Jason narrowed his eyes. He opened the chamber to ensure it wasn’t loaded then he handed the gun back to Mary.

“Jason, I…” Mary started to say.

“Not another word,” he warned her sharply. “I don't want to know whose weapon it is. As far as I'm concerned there was never a weapon here.”

Mary looked down shamefully and tucked the gun into her purse that hung at her side.

“What about Kirk?” Suzie asked nervously.

“I'll take care of Kirk,” Jason assured her. Just then Kirk radioed Jason to let him know that he had found Larry in the woods. “Is the suspect injured?” he asked.

“No,” Kirk's voice came back over the radio. He paused a moment before adding. “Says the ladies have a gun, but I didn’t see one.”

Jason nodded and smiled a little. “Me neither,” he replied.

“The two of you, just don’t mention the gun,” Jason warned them.

Mary nodded soundlessly. Suzie smiled faintly with appreciation. She knew that Jason was trying to protect them from

getting into trouble for being in possession of a weapon that they didn't own. As Jason jogged off into the woods to assist Kirk with Larry, Suzie looked over at her friend.

"It's over now, Mary," she said soothingly.

"I was so scared," Mary sighed.

"I know, so was I," Suzie admitted. "How did you get in the house? How did you even know I was here? More importantly, whose gun is that?" Suzie demanded.

"I think I need to sit down," Mary said as she sank down onto the first step of the small porch of the house.

"Okay," Suzie said softly. "Louis must have called Jason when he ran. But I still don't understand, how did you know we were here?"

Mary shook her head. "I know you too well, Suzie."

"What does that mean?" Suzie asked with confusion.

"It means I knew that you were up to something. I could tell that you were trying to keep me out of it. Which meant that it had to be pretty dangerous. So, when you left with Louis, I followed you. I parked a few houses down and was walking through the backyards so you wouldn't see me. That's when I saw you with Larry. I was behind the house so I tried his back door, and it was open. I walked through the house, and that's when I saw him holding that screwdriver at your neck. I knew that if he got you inside he would hurt you, so I was holding the door shut. When I saw Louis run, I knew that I had to act fast, because Larry was going to panic."

"I told Louis to run," Suzie said gently. "He tried to protect me."

"I know you did," Mary sighed. "Always trying to save others."

"Not this time," Suzie pointed out. "This time you saved me. But I still don't understand whose gun this is?" she asked.

Mary grimaced, "Wes questioned Gerald and found out about Larry, he told me what he had found out about Larry's past and that he suspected there was a connection between Larry and Warren, which led him to believe that Larry really was involved with Warren's death. I knew that it was going to be dangerous, and I knew that you and Louis were going to get in the middle of it. I also knew where Wes kept his extra weapon…"

"This is Wes' gun?" Suzie asked with a gasp. "Does he know you have it?"

"No, absolutely not, he would be furious if he knew. I made sure it wasn't loaded when I got it. I didn't want to hurt anyone I just

wanted to protect you," Mary shook her head. "I'm very lucky that Jason didn't take it. Then Wes would be in trouble, too."

"You took a lot of risks, Mary," Suzie admonished. "You could have been hurt or killed!"

"This from the woman who was being held hostage by a murderer?" Mary demanded as she looked into her friend's eyes. "I know that you think I've lived a sheltered life as a wife and mother, Suzie, while you've been out doing adventurous things. But when it comes to you, there is no way I am going to hesitate to do what I have to do to protect you."

Suzie smiled warmly at her words. "I appreciate that, Mary," she said as she hugged Mary again. "You're right. I didn't want you to get in the middle of all of this. But it's not because I think you're sheltered. It's your birthday, I just wanted it to be a special time for you."

"Well, I held a gun," Mary laughed a little.

"Not a word," Jason warned as he and Kirk emerged from the woods with Larry handcuffed between them. Kirk swept his gaze over the two women. His expression was stoney. Suzie still wasn't sure that he could be trusted, but he didn't seem to be asking about the weapon, and he was the one that said he hadn't seen a gun.

"I guess you'll be going back to prison after all, Larry," Suzie said smugly. "For a much longer time, this time."

Larry scowled at her. Kirk led him to the police car and guided him into the back seat. Louis appeared from the bushes beside the driveway. Only then did Suzie realize he had never really left. He had only hidden.

"Is everyone okay?" he asked as he walked up to Suzie and Mary.

"We will be," Suzie promised him. "Thanks to you calling the police," she added.

"I didn't know what else to do," Louis admitted.

"You did exactly the right thing, Louis," Mary said.

"Jason, we better get him down to the station," Kirk said as he rapped lightly on the roof of the police car. Jason glanced over at him and nodded. When he looked back at Suzie and Mary he frowned.

"I'm going to need statements from all of you," he said grimly. "Do you want me to get another car to bring you down to the station?"

“No, I'm okay to drive,” Suzie said. “Jason, Larry is the one who killed Warren Blasser. I think he did it by throwing pistachio shells at his window until he came out onto the balcony. He must have removed the screws from the balcony earlier in the day,” she pointed to the screwdriver that was laying on the ground nearby. “I imagine that is what he used. If you search his car you might even find the screws.”

“I don't think you need to worry about it,” Jason said. “I'm sure he'll confess in exchange for a shorter sentence. But I will have his house, car, and property searched for any further evidence,” he started to turn away. Then slowly he turned back to face her. “Suzie, I'm sorry that I didn't believe you straight away. I should have looked into everything more deeply from the start.”

“It's okay, Jason,” Suzie said. “You were just doing your job. There was nothing to indicate that anything sinister was going on in the beginning.”

Jason nodded and then headed off to the police car. Louis sat down on the step beside the two women.

“I think I like being a librarian much better than being a detective,” he said grimly. “My heart is still racing.”

“Don't worry, soon you'll be back in the nice, safe, quiet library,” Mary said with a slight laugh.

“I can't wait,” Louis admitted.

“At least you got your book back,” Suzie pointed out.

“And as least we cleared Gerald's name as a murderer,” Mary stated.

“Yes, Richard would be happy about that,” Louis said wistfully. “Gerald might not have been honest, but he was not a murderer.”

“We better get going,” Suzie said. “Jason will be expecting us. Mary, I think you better call Wes and tell him the truth about his weapon.”

“He's going to be so angry,” Mary cringed.

“Maybe,” Suzie agreed. “But if he has to report one of his weapons missing he's going to be in a lot more trouble with his boss. Better to tell him the truth, just in case anything comes up later.”

“I guess,” Mary nodded.

“Let's get you home,” Suzie said and hugged her friend. “Tomorrow is your birthday.”

“It is, isn't it?” Mary asked with a vague smile.

“I'm glad to hear that you and Wes are talking,” Suzie said hesitantly. She still wasn't sure if she should tell Mary what she had seen in the bar.

“Me, too,” Mary admitted with a girlish smile. It was that smile that made Suzie keep her mouth shut.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

Suzie and Mary spent the rest of the afternoon fielding interviews by Jason and Kirk, as well as sharing quite a bit of wine. Suzie was fairly sure that there wasn't enough wine in the world to take away the memory of that screwdriver pushed against the side of her neck. When she finally crawled into bed, Suzie felt as if she could sleep for a century. She was finally able to rest, now that she knew Warren's killer was behind bars, and that it wasn't a faulty railing that had killed him. She could only hope that would be enough to save the reputation of Dune House. She fell asleep with plans for regaining the community's trust floating through her mind.

It seemed like a cruel joke when Suzie’s alarm began buzzing. She slapped the button to quiet it down. Then she yawned as she stretched out in her bed. She was awake, but did not really want to get up. After the incident the day before, she was savoring the ability to just relax. Then slowly reality began to creep into her sleepy mind. Not only was there no time to relax as party preparations had to be made, Benjamin and Catherine would be arriving in just a few hours.

Suzie suddenly jumped up out of bed. She rushed around her room getting dressed and searching for the lists she had made of party information. One list was for supplies. Another list was for guests. The last list was for the errands she would have to run in order to get everything she needed that day. Just about everything depended on Mary being out of the house. Originally, Suzie had intended to let Wes handle that for her, but since they weren't exactly on speaking terms, she wasn't sure if that was going to happen. She felt a little worried as she padded out into the kitchen. She hoped that Mary might be sleeping in. The scent of fresh coffee indicated that she was not.

“Mary?” Suzie called out. She didn't see her in the kitchen or the dining room. Suzie frowned and then helped herself to a cup of coffee. She thought perhaps Mary had gone for an early morning walk along the beach. She walked over to the side door off the dining room that led onto the beach.

When Suzie stepped out onto the porch, she noticed Mary's robe tossed on the back of one of the lounge chairs. She thought it was a little odd as Mary usually dressed before she went out onto the porch. There was also a cup of coffee, half full on the table in front of the chair. Beside it was a newspaper. Suzie noticed that it was turned to an article about Larry and his involvement in Warren Blasser's death. To Suzie's relief the article did not mention the location of the crime. She was sure that Paul had something to do with that as he knew everyone worth knowing in the town, and he had likely called in a few favors to protect Dune House. Suzie was pleased to see that Warren would be getting his justice, even though it still saddened her to think of him.

Suzie’s mind was distracted by the fact that Mary was missing. She couldn't imagine her friend walking along the beach in her pajamas, birthday or not, Mary was much more modest than that. Suzie began walking around the wraparound porch in search of her friend.

“Mary?” she called out. She was beginning to grow concerned.

“I'm over here, Suzie,” Mary called back. She was on the rear porch. She had a bunch of flowers in her hands.

“Happy birthday!” Suzie said and gave Mary a quick hug. “What are those?” she asked as she looked at the flowers.

“A gift from Wes,” Mary said sadly. “He must have pre-ordered them. He certainly wouldn't want me to have them now.”

“What do you mean?” Suzie asked with concern.

“They were delivered early this morning while I was having my coffee. I knew you'd be up soon, I didn't want you to see me upset,” she admitted.

“Mary, you don't need to hide your feelings from me,” Suzie said and shook her head. “But, why do you think Wes wouldn't want you to have your flowers if he ordered them for you?”

“Well, because when I returned his gun to him last night, he was quite upset,” Mary admitted. “He was furious really. He told me that I never should have taken it in the first place, that it was a very dangerous thing I did, and that he couldn't trust me.”

“Oh, Mary I'm sorry,” Suzie said and frowned. “I'll talk to him. I'll explain to him how you saved my life.”

“No,” Mary shook her head. “I don't think there's really a point. He was right. I never should have taken it. He said if I had just told him the trouble I was in he would have been more than happy to help me. He lectured me about going there alone,” she sighed and looked out over the water. “You know, I thought I was ready for romance again, Suzie. But, I rather like not having anyone around to lecture me, or have an opinion on my life.”

“Hmm,” Suzie narrowed her eyes playfully. “Well, you do still have me,” she reminded her. “I plan to lecture you and have an opinion on your life for a very long time to come.”

“Very funny,” Mary cracked a smile. “But seriously. All of this questioning and mysterious behavior, it has left me exhausted. Is love really worth all of this work?” she shook her head as she looked back down at the flowers. “I guess there's really no reason to even think about it, considering that he wants nothing to do with me now.”

“Did he tell you that?” Suzie asked.

“Not in so many words,” Mary admitted. “But I knew that he meant it.”

“I'm sorry, sweetie,” Suzie said and hugged her. She was absolutely livid inside. She couldn't imagine a man who could be so cruel as to break a woman's heart right before her birthday. Sure he did have a reason to be angry since she did steal his weapon, but that didn't mean that he had to be so hurtful about it. “Maybe he will cool off and come to his senses.”

“To be honest, I'm not so sure that I want him to,” Mary admitted. “He was obviously focused on other things all week. I don't think the message could be much clearer. He is not interested in being part of my life.”

“Try not to think about it too much,” Suzie said. “It's your birthday today, remember?”

“Yes,” Mary smiled. “We should go out together and do something, Suzie. I don't want to spend the whole day thinking about Wes. Would you like to go to the movies or something?” she asked hopefully.

Suzie realized she was in a very difficult position. She had a ton of preparations to complete, including picking up Benjamin and Catherine from the airport. She had no idea how she could do any

of it if she was spending the day with Mary. But she knew it would hurt her friend if she turned her down now.

“Why don't we go to lunch and then make plans from there?” Suzie suggested.

“Sounds good,” Mary said. She frowned for a moment and then spoke again, “I tried calling both Benjamin and Catherine this morning. I just wanted to hear their voices so I could cheer up. Neither of them answered. I know they're busy, and I really don't expect them to remember that it is my birthday, I just so wanted to hear them.”

“They might still be sleeping,” Suzie pointed out and tried to swallow back her guilt. “You know how college kids are.”

“You're right,” Mary shook her head. “I guess I'm just in a funk. I hope I can get out of it soon.”

“I'll make sure that you do,” Suzie assured her. “I'm going to make us some pancakes,” she said decisively.

“That sounds delicious,” Mary agreed with a wide smile. “Thank you, Suzie.”

“You just stay out here and enjoy the view,” Suzie encouraged her. “I'll bring everything to you.”

“Okay, I will,” Mary said as she gazed out over the glittering water. “I can't complain about the view, that's for sure.”

Suzie ducked back into the house. As soon as she was inside she ran to her room and grabbed her cell phone. She dialed Paul's number. She could only hope that he would be awake early even though it was his first day off the boat.

“Hello?” he finally answered groggily.

“Paul, I need you,” she said urgently.

“Oh baby, I need you, too,” he mumbled half-asleep.

“Paul! Be serious!” Suzie said sharply.

“What? What is it? Are you in trouble?” he asked, suddenly wide awake.

“No, I'm not in trouble, but my surprise party is,” Suzie sighed. “I'm sorry for waking you, it's just that I don't know who else to ask for help.”

“You can always ask me for help, Suzie,” Paul said firmly. “What can I do?”

“Mary and Wes are on the outs, so now she wants to spend the day with me. But I'm supposed to be picking up Ben and Cathy from the airport in two hours,” she explained as she walked cautiously

back towards the kitchen.

“Wow, that is a problem,” he said. “Would you like me to pick them up?”

“Would you?” she asked warmly. “That would help me out so much.”

“Of course, and if there's anything else that you need, just let me know,” he replied. “I think it's amazing that after all you went through yesterday you're still sticking with the party today.”

“Well, it's her first birthday away from Kent, and she needs to have it even more now that Wes is being such a jerk,” she sighed.

“Now, to be fair she did steal his gun,” Paul pointed out.

“Paul, I don't need you getting all brotherhood of man on me right now,” Suzie said. “I just need to get things together for Mary.”

“Don't worry,” Paul laughed. “Wes is being flat out stupid if he's passing up on a chance to spend time with Mary. I'll get the kids from the airport, just text them and let them know that it will be me picking them up.”

“Okay, I will,” Suzie sighed. “Thanks Paul, and sorry for being so out of sorts this morning.”

“Don't apologize to me, sweetheart, I love you no matter what kind of sorts you're in,” he replied lovingly. Suzie smiled to herself. It was nice to be reminded how lucky she was. But it stung a little to think that Mary was not getting the same kind of treatment. She decided to call Wes and give him a piece of her mind. She dialed his number, but it went straight to voicemail. She was just pouring some pancake batter into the pan when Mary stuck her head inside the house.

“Suzie, I'm going to get dressed, let me know if you need help with breakfast.”

“Okay, I've got it covered,” Suzie smiled at her. Soon she had a plate filled with fluffy pancakes. She was fairly proud of them as she wasn't always the best cook. Just then she remembered to send the text to Benjamin and Catherine. She knew that they were probably already on the plane. She hoped that they would get the text when they landed. She prepared two plates for breakfast, and then heard a knock at the door. She walked over to the door and opened it to find Jason and Kirk standing outside. Suzie felt her heart skip a beat. She wondered if there had been a problem with Mary being in possession of the gun.

“Morning, Suzie,” Jason said as he took his hat off. He ran his

hand back through his short red hair. “We wanted to check in with you two and make sure you're doing okay. I know today is Mary's birthday.”

“How nice,” Mary said as she stepped up behind Suzie. “Come in, have some breakfast,” she offered warmly. Jason glanced over at Kirk who nodded eagerly.

“It smells delicious,” Kirk said.

“There is plenty,” Suzie said in a welcoming tone and opened the door further so that they could step inside. Soon, all four of them were on the porch sharing breakfast.

“How did things go at the station?” Suzie asked.

“Larry gave a full confession,” Jason said. “He even detailed how he took the screws out of the balcony. He used a ladder and climbed up, took the screws out, and climbed back down. Then, in the middle of the night he threw pistachio shells up on the balcony to get Warren to come outside. He said he waved and hollered as if he was in trouble to get Warren to lean forward against the railing. After that he fled off down the beach.”

“He would have gotten away with it,” Kirk said. “There was no physical evidence. He didn't even leave a fingerprint on the balcony, he never touched it, just the screws which he took with him. If it wasn't for the three of you getting in the middle of things, Warren Blasser's death would have been ruled an accident.”

“I'm just glad that his family will get some closure,” Mary said sadly.

“Listen to us talking about murder on Mary's birthday,” Jason said with a shake of his head. “Today should be a happy day.”

“With good friends and good food how could it not be?” Mary asked. She seemed to be in a much better mood. Suzie was glad that they had stopped by.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15

After Suzie had cleaned up from breakfast, she hid in her room to make a few phone calls.

“I need the cake to be delivered,” she explained to the baker. “If you can have it here by about five that would be perfect. Of course I'll pay extra.” Once the cake delivery was settled she placed a call to the caterers to make sure that the food would be ready to go by five. When she stepped out of her room she found Mary standing outside of it.

“What are you up to?” she asked suspiciously. “You've been sneaking around all day.”

“Nothing,” Suzie said innocently. “I was just making arrangements to meet with Paul later this evening.”

“Oh,” Mary nodded a little. She did her best to hide her disappointment. Suzie was just about to come up with even more excuses when her phone began ringing.

“I have to take this, I'm sorry, Mary,” Suzie said as she ducked back into her room. It was Paul.

“Hello?” she whispered into the phone.

“Suzie, why are you still at Dune House?” he asked. “I'm here with Benjamin and Catherine.”

“What?” Suzie glanced at her watch. “Oh no, I'm sorry! I lost track of time!”

“Well, if you come out you're going to see us. Do you want me to take them to lunch and come back in a little bit?” he asked.

“No, actually, just bring them in the back,” Suzie said. “Give me five minutes.”

“Okay,” Paul replied before he hung up the phone.

Suzie rushed back to Mary's side. “Ready to go to a movie?” she asked.

“Really?” Mary smiled with excitement.

“Yes, absolutely,” Suzie said. “Let's go right now, not a moment to waste.”

“Did you even check the times?” Mary asked with some confusion.

“Sure I did,” Suzie assured her. “Wait for me on the porch,” Suzie instructed. “I just have to grab my purse.”

“Don't worry about it, I'll drive and I'll pay,” Mary said. “Let's go or we'll miss the previews.”

“No way, you can't pay on your birthday,” Suzie said. “You get the car started, I'll be right out.”

“Okay, okay, but hurry,” Mary said as she stepped out onto the porch. As soon as she closed the door, Suzie rushed to the back door. She opened it to find Paul, Benjamin, and Catherine standing outside.

“Oh, it's so good to see you!” she said as she gave them both a quick hug. “I'm sorry to do this, but things haven't worked out the way I planned. I need to get you upstairs and hidden away before your mother sees you.”

“It's okay, Aunt Suzie,” Benjamin said and hugged her. Catherine gave her another tight hug.

“Is there anything that we can do to help?” she asked hopefully.

“Actually,” Suzie glanced between the two of them. “If you wouldn't mind, I could really use some help with decorating the dining room. I won't be able to if I'm spending time with Mary.”

“No problem,” Catherine said with a smile. “We'd be happy to help.”

“I can take them anywhere they need to go,” Paul added. “Just go enjoy your time with Mary.”

“Thank you so much,” Suzie sighed.

“Suzie?” Mary called out as she stuck her head in the front door. “Did you find your purse?”

Suzie gasped and herded Benjamin and Catherine into the pantry.

“Not yet!” Suzie called back shakily.

“Well, it's right here,” Mary said as she picked up Suzie’s purse which had been sitting on the kitchen island. Paul was crouched down behind it.

“Oh, silly me,” Suzie said. “Let's go!”

“Suzie, are you sure that you're okay?” Mary asked. “Yesterday

was quite traumatic, maybe we should just stay in."

"Nonsense," Suzie said. "Let's get going," she nearly pushed Mary out through the front door. The rest of the afternoon was a whirlwind of Suzie sneaking off to make phone calls. Mary was exasperated by the time the movie was over and they had finished lunch.

"Really Suzie, if you'd rather be with Paul it's fine," Mary said with a shake of her head.

"The only person I want to be with on your birthday is you," Suzie insisted. "But not with that hair," she added.

"What?" Mary asked with surprise. She had worn the same hairstyle for a very long time.

"That's my birthday gift to you Mary, a trip to the hair salon," Suzie said. "I'm going to let you get your hair done while I cook you a nice dinner at home. Louis said he will give you a ride home when you are done."

"Okay, I guess," Mary said with a slight frown. Then she shook her head and smiled. "Thank you, Suzie," she said warmly.

"You deserve it, Mary," Suzie said. Once she had made the arrangements with the hairstylist and pleaded with her to delay her until the time of the party, Suzie sent a text to Louis to let him know that Mary would be waiting for him. Then she rushed back to Dune House to help with the final party preparations and greet the guests. She had invited just about the entire town. As everyone began to arrive, she noticed that Wes was missing. Suzie tried to call Wes to see if he was going to be there. His phone went to voicemail. She growled with frustration.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked.

"I can't believe he's not here yet," Suzie said as she paced back and forth in the foyer.

"It's okay, Suzie," Paul said in an attempt to soothe her. "I'm sure he'll be here. Something must have come up."

"He better be dead," Suzie muttered. "Or I'll kill him myself."

Paul raised his hands and backed away a few steps. "Scary," he said.

"It's her birthday," Suzie grumbled. "Her first one since she got away from that beast. She will be hurt if he doesn't show and I will be so furious with him."

"Wow," Paul chuckled. "I've never seen this side of you, Suzie," he stepped closer to her. "I think I like it."

“Not now, Paul,” she huffed and then peered out the front window. “Unbelievable,” she muttered just as a text came through from Louis to say that he and Mary were on their way. “Mary’s on her way, Wes is going to ruin the surprise,” Suzie said with frustration.

“Suzie remember, this is for Mary,” Paul said gently. “Let's just try to have fun, and maybe not so much talk about murder with the cop here,” he tilted his head towards Jason who had walked out to the foyer.

“Murder?” he asked and looked between the two. “I thought this was a party?”

“You're right, you're right,” Suzie sighed. “Okay, everybody hide!” she said as she headed into the kitchen. Benjamin and Catherine were ducked behind the front desk. Mary opened the door. Suzie was surprised by the bobbed hairstyle she had chosen. It suited her, and made her eyes shine.

“Surprise!” Suzie shouted, signaling everyone to jump up from behind the furniture. Mary gasped and jumped backwards a few feet.

“What have you done, Suzie?” she roared. “Benjamin, Catherine?” she cried out. “Oh my babies!” she said happily and rushed over to them. She smothered them in hugs and kisses. Suzie couldn't stop smiling. Until she heard Wes shuffle in behind her.

“It's about time,” she said to him sharply and fixed him with a glare.

Wes shot back a harsh look. “I'm sorry, I got held up.”

“Wes! Do you see what Suzie has done?” Mary said, laughing with joy.

“I'm sorry I was late,” he said. “Here, I brought you a present,” Wes was still eying Suzie with some annoyance.

“Thank you,” Mary said sweetly. Suzie noticed Benjamin watching Wes closely, before he whispered to his sister.

“Open it,” Wes insisted. “I can't wait for you to see it.”

Mary smiled and began carefully unwrapping the gift. Inside the paper was a wooden box, with intricate designs on the sides.

“It's beautiful,” Mary said.

“No, no, you have to open the box,” Wes grinned.

Mary raised her eyebrows and lifted the lid on the box. Inside was what appeared to be a painting of the outside of Dune House, framed by the clear blue sea.

“It's a puzzle,” Wes blurted out. “I know how much you like them, so I thought you might like this.”

“I do,” Mary said with a gasp. “It's perfect, Wes,” she hugged him tightly.

“I'm glad you like it,” Wes said proudly. “I really wanted it to be a surprise and it was quite an adventure to get it done. I had to hunt down some real artists, and you know how unreliable they can be.”

“Is this what you've been keeping a secret?” Mary asked with surprise.

“Well, I thought it would be a simple present at first, but there was a lot more to it than I expected. I'm sorry that I've been so preoccupied, I just wanted it to be a surprise.”

“It is,” Mary said warmly. “A beautiful one. I don't think I've ever had a more wonderful birthday,” she admitted. Suzie felt a sense of warmth wash over her. It had been touch and go for a while, but it seemed the party was going to be a success.

Once the party was in full swing Suzie felt a sense of relief. She could see that Mary was having a wonderful time with Wes, Catherine, and Benjamin. The rest of the guests seemed to be enjoying the food and beverages as well as the company. Suzie stepped out onto the porch to grab a breath of fresh air. She heard footsteps just behind her.

“A chance to be alone,” Paul said as he slid his arms around her. “You did a great job, Suzie.”

“I never could have done it without you,” Suzie said with a grim smile. “This party was almost a disaster.”

“It could never be a disaster with you in charge,” Paul said firmly. “You gave her a great birthday, Suzie.”

“She deserves it,” Suzie said with a fond smile.

“So, now that Wes and Mary are lost in romance again, maybe we could try for some of our own?” he suggested.

“That sounds like a lovely idea to me, Paul,” Suzie replied. She smiled as he pulled her close.

The End

OceanofPDF.com

RUFFLED FEATHERS

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 7

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

Gray stretched out before Suzie. The overcast morning left the ocean without its sparkle. Suzie wrapped her arms around herself in a light hug to block out the morning chill. She loved the moments just after dawn when only the fishermen were out and the quiet was only interrupted by the crash of the waves against the sand. It was not long ago that she had taken a leap and changed her life. She could honestly say that it was the best decision of her life. The shared responsibility of Dune House with her best friend, Mary, had brought a sense of purpose and freedom that she hadn't expected. After one last deep breath of the crisp, salty air Suzie turned and walked back towards the majestic house.

It was a grand, old house, and its many rooms welcomed guests from all over the world who wanted the quaint bed and breakfast experience that Dune House offered. When Suzie first inherited it, it needed a lot of work and remodeling. Now, it was once again the gem that shone over the town of Garber. Suzie was almost to the side door that led through the dining room when she noticed a shadow along the exterior wall. She paused and watched as the shadow became more defined. From the distance where she stood she could see the outline of a figure. Suzie narrowed her eyes.

Although Mary did wake up early she tended to stay in the house or sit on the porch. She did not think that it was likely that Mary would creep around the side of the house. Suzie began to follow the shadow. In her past as an investigative journalist she always had a knack for spotting trouble. This looked like trouble. She walked around the side of the house and saw the back of a man's head. He leaned heavily on the wall and attempted to peer through the window of one of the first floor bathrooms.

"Excuse me? Just what do you think you're doing?" The man

straightened up and turned to face her. She recognized him right away. “Maurice? What are you doing?” Maurice lowered his eyes.

“I’m not doing any harm. I promise that, Suzie.”

“You can promise it all you want, but that doesn’t explain why you’re peering in one of my bathroom windows.”

“No one’s in there.”

“Thank goodness. What are you doing?” She raised an eyebrow.

“I just wanted to see if that beast had arrived yet.”

“Beast?” Suzie shook her head. “You’re not making any sense. Did you forget your meds today?”

“Ha ha.” Maurice jabbed his thumb towards Dune House. “You’ve got Priscilla Kane staying here. I know you do. How could you let her stay?”

“I have no problem with Priscilla.”

“Well, you should.” He crossed his arms. “Her plans are going to affect all of us.”

“Maybe. Maybe they will change things for the better. Why a person stays at Dune House is not my business. If they want to book a room, they can have a room, and they are welcomed just like any other guest.”

“I think that you need to be more concerned about the way that things are going for this town. The locals have accepted you, but that can change.”

“Are you threatening me, Maurice Lungdley?” Suzie’s bright blue eyes squinted at the corners. “Because that’s a very dangerous thing to do.”

“No, I’m not threatening you. I’m warning you. No one is going to be happy about you allowing her to stay here. It’s going to ruffle some feathers.”

“I don’t care if people are unhappy, I can let whoever I want to stay, stay. It’s my bed and breakfast.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Not that it’s your or anyone else’s business, but she has not arrived yet. She will arrive today. If I see you or anyone else hanging around here trying to cause trouble I will make sure that Jason is notified so the police can handle it. Understand?”

“Oh sure. It must be nice to have a cousin with a badge. You can grand stand all you want, but you know as well as I do that if this development happens in Garber our perfect little seaside town will be destroyed.”

“Maurice, go back to your motel and take care of your guests. Stop worrying so much about things you can’t control.” Suzie waved her hand through the air and headed for the door. She looked back once to be sure that Maurice walked towards the parking lot. As she stepped into the dining room her heart did flutter a little. Priscilla Kane was someone who held a lot of power, and she knew it. She and her business partner, Neil Runkin, were due to arrive later that day for check-in. Although Suzie did believe in what she had said to Maurice she couldn’t deny that she was a little anxious about Priscilla’s arrival.

“Morning. I made us some coffee.” Mary smiled as Suzie walked into the kitchen. Suzie took a moment to admire her friend. Though Mary was completely unaware of it she was a pretty woman with soft features and loose, auburn hair just touched with gray. She was only a few years older than Suzie.

“How are you this morning?” Suzie leaned against the counter.

“Not too bad. My knees are just a little stiff, but not too sore today.”

“Oh good.” Suzie smiled and accepted a mug of coffee.

“I’ll be even better once I loosen up a bit.” Mary winked at her. “I have to be. Wes is going to take me out tonight to one of his favorite restaurants, it’s German.”

“Oh, that should be delicious.”

“I’m looking forward to it. I already checked in on Priscilla and Neil’s rooms, they are all set.”

“Thanks Mary. You will not believe who was lurking around outside.”

“Who?”

“Maurice Lungdley.”

“Oh wonderful. So it begins.” Mary shook her head. “We’re not going to be the most popular people around here for allowing them to stay here.”

“Maybe not, but I think we did the right thing. I don’t have to agree with someone’s views or their intentions for them to have a room at Dune House.”

“I know.” Mary sighed. “I just hope that she’ll decide against using Garber as the location for her new, all-inclusive resort.”

“People will still want to stay in a quaint bed and breakfast.”

“I know, it’s not that. It’s just that Jude’s Café will become a chain coffee outlet, and the diner will be turned into a fast food

place. It's just hard to watch it happen."

"Our town is strong enough to make it through."

"Maybe," Mary said. She gazed down into her cup of coffee. "I guess we will find out."

Suzie walked through the dining room, the living room, and the front lobby to make sure that everything was as it should be. It was easy for things to get out of place when they had multiple guests. She straightened a few pillows and turned on some accent lamps to give the living room a cozy feel. Even though Dune House had been quite a surprise in her life she had come to love it. It was almost as if she never had a home until she settled there. Perhaps Paul was part of that, too. Just when she was certain that she would never need another companion he appeared in her life.

As Suzie stepped out onto the deck off the dining room to check on the seating there, she caught sight of a patrol car pulling into the large parking lot. Suzie pushed one of the chairs up against a metal table then brushed her hands off. She walked out to the parking lot just as a young man stepped out of the patrol car. In uniform Jason should have looked older, but to Suzie he always looked youthful.

"Morning Jason."

"Hi Suzie. I just wanted to stop in and see how everything is going."

"Fibber. You're here because you know that Priscilla Kane and Neil Runkin are arriving today."

"Okay, maybe." He smiled. "I just want to make sure that no one is hassling you."

"I'm fine, Jason." She thought about mentioning Maurice, but she didn't want to cause the man too much trouble. She knew that he was desperate to protect the future of his business and she assumed that he was harmless.

“Good. Well, you know I’m just a phone call away.”

“I know.” Suzie nodded.

“Is Paul in yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Can you let me know as soon as he docks?”

“Sure. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, there’s just something I need to talk to him about.”

“Okay, no problem.” Suzie smiled at him. “Thanks for checking on me.”

“Always.” He smiled then climbed back into the car. As he drove away Suzie was reminded of how sweet it was to have family. When she returned to the bed and breakfast Mary met her in the dining room.

“Was that Jason?”

“Yes, he came by to check in on us.”

“Aw, how sweet.”

“It was.” Suzie grinned. “Priscilla should be here in a few hours.”

“I checked in on Stewart, he’s doing well and is going on a boat tour later.”

“Oh good. He’s so quiet, one of the best guests we’ve ever had.”

“I think he just prefers to be left to his own devices, which certainly makes our job less stressful.”

“Yes, it does,” Suzie agreed. “I don’t think Priscilla Kane will be quite as easy.”

“Nor do I. Her reputation is not exactly known as being low maintenance.”

“Well, we’ll be ready for her.” Suzie walked towards the front desk. “As long as she has everything she needs then she should be just fine.”

Mary nodded in agreement. “I’ll take one more look in their rooms to make sure everything is just right.”

“Thanks Mary.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

As Suzie sorted through the paperwork at the front desk she thought about what they might face when Priscilla and Neil arrived. It was not exactly the easiest thing to deal with a demanding guest, but they were getting used to it and Suzie felt it would be worth it. If Priscilla and Neil were well taken care of she hoped they would mention it to their associates and that could draw more guests to Dune House. As she finished up the front door of Dune House swung open.

"Hello hello? Is there someone who can get my things?"

Suzie looked up with surprise. Priscilla Kane stood in the doorway with a large birdcage in one hand and a tiny glittering purse in the other. It looked like it was encrusted with diamonds. The same extravagance was reflected in the outfit she wore which was as colorful as it was expensive. Priscilla appeared to be in her early fifties, but Suzie knew that she was closer to sixty. She became interested in Priscilla when she found out that she was planning on building a resort in Garber and was staying at Dune House.

"Ms. Kane, I apologize, I didn't expect you so soon. I will go and get your things for you."

"Never mind that, just get me checked in. You can get my things once that's settled."

"That will just take a moment." Suzie pulled up Priscilla's file on the computer and began entering in her arrival information. "Your room is all prepared for you. Breakfast is included with your stay. We can also provide lunch and dinner if you let us know. I've booked the room across the hall for your business partner."

"Oh dear, I'm not sure that I need to be that close to Runkin."

"I can switch his room if you'd like." Suzie did her best to

conceal her surprise. She assumed that they were friendly since they had booked the same place to stay, but working together and staying together might have become tedious. So far Priscilla's visit was not going very well.

"It's fine. I'm sure he'll keep himself occupied with the most expensive things he can. What time is dinner tonight?"

"At six, but if you need to come later you're welcome to. Dinner is available until seven-thirty."

"That's very flexible of you. I'm sure I will have no problem being there by six. I'm going to take a little nap. The drive was a bit much for me."

"Of course."

"Please make sure that there is no draft in my room as I would not want my Benita to get sick." She smiled at the bird through the bars of the cage.

"We'll make sure." Suzie assured her. She peeked in through the bars of the birdcage at the parakeet. "She's beautiful."

"Yes, she is. She talks, too." Mary walked up to the desk as Priscilla continued to rave about her bird. "Although, sometimes I wish she didn't repeat so much." She rolled her eyes. "Let me tell you it's caused some rather awkward moments."

"Really?" Mary's smile widened. "I always wanted a bird as a pet."

"Oh no, no. She's not a pet. She's my family. It's very important to me that she is well taken care of, understand?"

"Yes, of course." Suzie smiled to assure her. "We will treat her as if she is another guest."

"Thank you." Priscilla sighed with relief. "Some people don't understand, but Benita is the closest family I have."

"I'll show you to your room if you would like." Mary gestured down the side hallway.

"I'll go and get your things." Suzie walked around the desk.

"Wonderful." Priscilla smiled.

"Here, let me get Benita for you." Mary reached for the cage.

"No, no. Only I carry my Benita. Thank you." She picked up the cage and followed after Mary. Suzie stepped outside to find Priscilla's driver waiting beside the trunk.

"Where can I place these?" He adjusted his cap.

"If you'd like you can take them right into Priscilla's room."

"No, I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to do that."

“Why not?” Suzie picked up one of the suitcases. It was not heavy.

“Priscilla prefers that not many people are allowed into her living areas. When I drive her home I may leave things in the foyer, but I may not actually enter any further into the house.”

“Isn’t that a little strange?”

The middle-aged man lifted his shoulders in a mild shrug. “When you work with the very wealthy you get used to strange. I’d be happy to take them into the lobby for you.”

“No, that’s quite all right. I’ll take them in. Are you staying nearby?”

“Yes. A motel.” He nodded. “I will be available to Ms. Kane whenever she needs me.”

“All right.” Suzie picked up the other suitcase which was also fairly light.

“There’s one more thing.” He hauled out a hard shell overnight case. When Suzie tried to take it from him she nearly fell over. It was heavier than both of the suitcases. “Bird seed.”

“Ah.” Suzie nodded. “I’ll come back for that.” She carried the suitcases to Priscilla’s room. She arrived just as Mary stepped out.

“Oh, Priscilla wants to take a nap and not be disturbed until dinner.”

“Okay, I just have one more bag to bring in.” Suzie hurried back to the front of Dune House just in time to see another car pull up. It was a flashy, bright orange sports car, the kind that she had only seen in the movies or on the cover of magazines.

“Here’s Neil.” Priscilla’s driver grinned. “That’s my cue to leave.” He climbed into the car and drove off just as Neil opened his car door. He was a tall, clean-cut man. He appeared to be in his forties, the suit he wore was as simple as it was immaculate.

“Hello.” He nodded to Suzie who struggled to hold on to the small, but very heavy bag.

“Hello, Mr. Runkin, welcome to Dune House.”

“Ah, I see that Priscilla remembered the bird seed.” He grimaced. “She’s always afraid that Benita is not getting enough to eat. No one seems to be able to get through to her that Benita is a bird not a person.”

“Some people do consider their pets to be family.”

“Sure.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “Family.”

“Right this way, Mr. Runkin, I’ll be with you in just a moment.”

She led him into the lobby, then left him at the front desk as she carried the last bag to Priscilla's room. Mary passed her in the hallway.

"Neil Runkin has arrived, can you check him in for me?"

"Absolutely." Mary held the door open for Suzie and cringed as Suzie heaved the bag into Priscilla's room. Priscilla was already settled in her bed with a sleep mask to shield her eyes. Suzie hurried out of the room to avoid disturbing her. However, before she could pull the door closed behind her the bird in the cage began to shriek.

"Nuts! Nuts!" Suzie shut the door with a shake of her head. "I hope she packed some ear plugs, too."

Suzie arrived at the desk just behind Mary. Neil was standing at the desk and before they could say a word he looked at Mary and started talking.

"Good afternoon. I'd like a wake-up call, turn down service, and I will not be having dinner here."

Mary smiled. "Well, good afternoon to you, too, Mr. Runkin and welcome to Dune House."

"Yes, yes. I know all of what you intend to say. Please spare me and just show me to my room."

"As you wish." Suzie stepped forward and nodded. "We can settle the paperwork later." She led him to the room across the hall from Priscilla's. "Priscilla Kane's room is just across the hall," Suzie said as she pointed to the door.

"Oh good. I'll be sure to look in on her. Thanks." He pushed the door closed behind him. Suzie stood outside the door for a minute. She was accustomed to showing the guest around the room and answering any questions they might have. Mary met her at the end of the hallway.

“I guess Neil isn’t the friendly type,” Mary said.

“Yes, Priscilla was downright warm compared to him.” Suzie and Mary walked back to the front desk.

“It certainly seems that way.”

“Although, apparently Priscilla does have some strange ways according to her driver, but she did seem very nice. She didn’t ask for much at least.”

“That’s true.” Mary frowned. “That doesn’t change how the town is going to receive her though.”

“I’m afraid that you’re right about that. However, I hope that we can still show her a good time.”

“I still think we should be careful about how friendly we get with Priscilla. Suzie, you know if the deal goes through we’re going to have to choose a side.” Mary straightened some paperwork on the desk. “It doesn’t pay to be neutral.”

“I didn’t expect this from you, Mary.” Suzie leaned against the desk.

“It’s not just about what we feel, Suzie, it’s about how we show our support to the community. If the town doesn’t want the resort, and we show support to it, then the town is not going to want to support us.”

Suzie sighed. “I guess you’re right about that. We’ll have to keep a close eye on things.”

“Wes warned me that things could get ugly. He’s seen things like this create huge feuds in the community and residents become violent. He’s even seen the meetings erupt into the street.”

“I think that’s a little extreme.”

“I guess that we’ll see.” Mary straightened up.

“That’s it for check-ins, right?” Suzie peered at the appointment book.

“Yes, unless we have any last minute guests. We have a light load over the next few days. Wes and I are going to go to German tomorrow night instead of tonight so I’ll be here for dinner. I thought that we can have the leftover beef stew from yesterday and I’m also going to try a new soup. Do you think that will be all right?”

“Yes, of course I do. I love your creations.”

“Wonderful. I’ll just get some of the vegetables ready. Let me know if you need anything.”

“I’m going to take a quick walk around the grounds to check on

things, then I'll be back in."

Suzie stepped out through the front door. She noticed that there were several cars passing Dune House. They drove slowly, but sped up when she appeared on the porch. Suzie looked towards the small town of Garber. The main street was lined with tiny, privately owned shops. The library was well-stocked but small. Even the police station was just large enough to look imposing. There was nothing grand about Garber, aside perhaps from Dune House. She tried to picture the massive resort, stretched along the majority of the beach. Maybe some would consider it progress, but she couldn't imagine Garber being any other way than it was now.

When Suzie stepped back inside she was greeted by the heady scent of soup. The flavorful aroma tickled all of her senses.

"Oh Mary, that smells delicious!"

"I think so, too." A man's voice drifted out of the kitchen. Suzie walked towards it.

"Wes? Is that you?" Suzie asked.

"It is." Wes smiled and started to speak again, but his mouth was occupied when a spoon was thrust towards it.

"Try it now, I added a few more spices," Mary said.

Wes savored the soup with a deep moan. "I don't think it can get any better, Mary."

"Well, you're wrong, it just needs to simmer a little while longer and then it will be perfect."

"I could get used to home-cooked meals." Wes licked his lips. "Microwave dinners can't compare now that I've tasted this."

Suzie eyed the pair as they shared a quick kiss. It warmed her heart to see such affection between them, but it also worried her just a smidgen. She hoped that Mary wouldn't be in any rush to set up house with Wes. They might not have known each other terribly long, but they were quite comfortable with one another.

"Are you joining us for dinner tonight, Wes?" Suzie peered into the soup pot.

"No, I'm afraid I can't. I'm due at work in half an hour." Wes was a detective in the neighboring town of Parish.

"I'm making him a container to take with him." Mary smiled. "And some rolls, some stew, and some dessert."

"Aw." Suzie winked. "You're spoiling him, Mary."

"I don't mind." Wes grinned. "Though my waistline is starting to pay the price."

“You’re perfect.” Mary patted his stomach.

“Thanks.” Wes’ cheeks flushed.

“I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone and set the table. Did any of the guests opt in for dinner?”

“Just Priscilla. I haven’t heard a peep out of Stewart, and Neil made it clear that he will not be eating here.”

“That’s fine, more soup for us.” Suzie winked. She carried the dinner service tray out to the dining room table. As she set the table for three she could hear Mary and Wes chatting in the kitchen. A subtle squeeze in her chest reminded her that she missed Paul. It was a new feeling for her to long for a man. She smiled at the thought that he would be back soon. Sometimes the time away made the reunion that much sweeter. Once the table was set Suzie started back towards the kitchen. Mary and Wes passed her in the entrance.

“I’m just going to walk Wes out to his car.”

“Okay. Good night, Wes.”

“Night Suzie. Enjoy the soup. I know I will.” He held up a brown paper bag. Suzie smiled and ducked into the kitchen.

As Suzie washed a few of the dishes that Mary had used while making the soup she considered what a conversation with Priscilla might be like. She didn’t have to wait long to find out as Priscilla walked into the dining room a few minutes later with Benita in her cage.

“I’m sorry, I know I’m early, but I just couldn’t wait any longer. I’ve been absolutely tortured by that scent. It is so divine.”

“Well, there’s no reason why we can’t have dinner a little early. It will just be the three of us.”

“Four!” Priscilla held up the birdcage with a smile.

“Oh yes, of course, four.” Suzie smiled.

While Suzie settled Priscilla at the table Mary began to serve the soup, along with bread, and a homemade cheese spread. Benita’s cage was perched on the chair right next to Priscilla.

“Would you like some wine?” Suzie offered.

“No, thanks.” Priscilla shook her head and then tasted a spoonful of the soup. “Oh, this is delicious. What is that flavor?”

“Ginger.” Mary smiled. “It’s a new recipe I wanted to try. I hope you enjoy it.”

“I do, very much.” Priscilla dipped her spoon back into the soup. “I’m so glad that I decided to stay here for dinner. Neil insisted on

making a reservation at some five star place in Parish. I just have a hard time enjoying restaurant food over and over again. It's really been a long time since I've had anything home-cooked."

"Mary's meals are always delicious." Suzie raised her glass of wine to her friend. "I promise you, you will never leave the table hungry."

"Speaking of hungry," Mary said. "I'll just dish up the stew." She stood up and started spooning the stew onto three plates.

"Thank you! This is like a feast," Priscilla said as Mary placed a plate in front of her. "I have to say that I didn't expect such a warm welcome."

"Oh?" Mary sipped her wine.

"No, I've done this many times you know. I like to find small towns so I can help them grow. In each and every town there is resistance. This is the first time I've been treated like a guest rather than an invader. I really appreciate that."

"Well, we're very happy to have you." Suzie smiled. "Our first priority is providing a comfortable, warm environment for our guests."

"I'll have to remember that motto for the resort. Too many people these days forget that a vacation is actually supposed to be a vacation with as little work as possible."

"That's the truth." Mary nodded. "We have some guests who arrive here with every minute of their vacation mapped out from start to finish. It amazes me that they aren't more exhausted from their vacation than their regular work schedule."

"I don't know, I've always enjoyed a good adventure." Suzie gazed out through the double glass doors that led onto the deck. She wondered what kind of adventure Paul was having out there on the water. She enjoyed boats and she wanted to join him. "But I also love the quiet nights curled up in front of a fire with a good book."

"Oh yes." Priscilla sighed at the idea. "That I do love. Thank you, ladies, for the company, I guess I should turn in."

"There are books in the living room if you'd like to pick one out." Mary smiled.

"How lovely." Priscilla picked up the birdcage.

"Nuts! Nuts!" The bird squawked.

"You'll have to excuse her, she gets a little excited." The bird continued to squawk as Priscilla disappeared down the hall. Suzie

and Mary exchanged a look over the remainder of their stew.

"I guess that Benita is more of a fan of nuts than ginger," Suzie said.

"Must be." Mary grinned.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

The next morning was a busy one. Suzie prepared breakfast, while Mary tidied the rooms. Priscilla appeared in the kitchen just as Suzie stacked up a platter full of french toast.

"Oh, that looks tasty!" Priscilla said as Neil stepped into the kitchen behind her.

"You're not really going to eat that are you?" Neil scrunched up his nose at the french toast that Suzie had prepared. "It's loaded with sugar."

"It looks fantastic to me." Priscilla smiled. "If you want to starve that's your choice. I'm going to get a good breakfast under my belt before we start our community tour."

"Fine, fine." Neil sat down beside her and reluctantly accepted a plate.

"Thank you, Suzie." Priscilla smiled at her as she picked up a fork, ready to dive in.

"You're very welcome." Suzie offered a warm touch to the woman's shoulder. Then she turned her attention to Neil. "I can assure you, Neil, I didn't put too much sugar on the toast."

"Sure." He pushed the toast around his plate.

"Runkin, don't be so rude." Priscilla rolled her eyes. "If it isn't made by a chef on television he thinks it isn't worth eating."

"Well, I can tell you that I've never been on television, but this is my favorite kind of french toast. Mary taught me the recipe."

"I'm eating, aren't I?" Neil shoved a forkful into his mouth. Suzie did her best not to be insulted by the grimace that swept over his face.

"I wondered if you two might like a list of some of the attractions in town."

"No thanks. We have a plan." Neil cleared his throat. "Can I

have some water please?" Suzie nodded and gave him a bottle of water.

"Yes, we have a few places we're going to visit before we head to the community meeting. Will you be going, Suzie?"

"I don't know." Suzie frowned. "I'm not sure that it's the right place for me to be."

"Well, I'd love to hear your opinion, plus you'll have a chance to learn more about our plans. I hope to see you there," Priscilla said.

"Thanks." Suzie smiled. She joined them for breakfast and kept a plate warm for Mary. Mary and Stewart walked into the kitchen a few minutes later.

"Is there any french toast left?" Stewart looked hopeful.

"Yes of course, I'll get you a plate," Suzie said. After giving Stewart the french toast they ate in silence.

"We should be going." Priscilla finished the last bite, then wiped her mouth with a napkin. "Thanks for breakfast, Suzie, and I hope to see you later. Both of you." She nodded to Mary as she stood up. Neil followed after her though he did not bother to say goodbye. Suzie began clearing the breakfast dishes.

"I can do that." Mary started to stand up.

"No way, you've just cleaned the rooms, rest a bit. Then you can keep me company while I wash the dishes."

Once everything was piled into the sink Mary joined Suzie in the kitchen.

"I can't get over how different Neil and Priscilla are. I do hope that Priscilla does most of the talking at the meeting."

Suzie sloshed a sponge through the soapy water. "I think we should go to the meeting."

"Suzie, I don't know if that is a good idea. We are hosting Neil and Priscilla, our presence there might be taken the wrong way."

"That we are interested in Garber and supporting its citizens?" Suzie stacked a few dishes in the drainer. Mary promptly picked them up and began drying them.

"Or that we support Priscilla and Neil which is not something that we can do if we want to keep the support of the locals."

"We are the locals now, Mary. I think we've been here long enough to call ourselves that. I'll be honest, it really bothered me how aggressive some people were towards us when we first started renovating Dune House. I think it would be nice to show Priscilla and Neil some courtesy." Suzie washed the last dish and handed it

over to Mary.

“Suzie, are you telling me that you can’t see the difference here?” Mary stared at her for a long moment.

“Tell me, Mary. What am I missing?” Suzie studied her friend. She trusted Mary’s opinion above any other opinion. There was no question that they had lived different lives, but they had always been able to advise and guide each other through the bumps and valleys. Mary could always make Suzie’s thoughts clear for her.

“Suzie, this isn’t the city. When we came here people were upset because they expected Dune House to go to Jason, they also expected it to remain untouched. Even though they had no ownership of Dune House, they considered it their own, a part of their hearts. But we won their trust by respecting the environment, the history of Dune House, and using only locals to help us with the construction. Priscilla isn’t planning to do any of that. She’s planning to drop a giant resort on the small amount of beach property that is available here. It will block the view for many of the locals, it will put many of the shops out of business, and it’s not likely that they will use any local help to build it. There have been numerous studies that show the impact on the wildlife will be atrocious, yet Priscilla doesn’t appear to care. That’s the difference. You and I rebuilt Dune House with love and respect, Priscilla just wants to own a chunk of the beach and make as big a profit as possible.”

Suzie pursed her lips and nodded a little. “I guess you’re right. Sometimes I think the people around here are too resistant to progress, but I forgot, this town only exists because it creates and supports its own economy. A huge resort would disrupt everything.”

“Not to mention the fishing.” Mary shook her head. “Wait until Paul gets in and finds out who we have staying here. I dare say he will not be happy.”

“I didn’t even think about that.” Suzie cringed. She hadn’t mentioned the guests to Paul only because it never occurred to her to, but she hoped he wouldn’t think that she had deliberately hidden it from him.

“More watercraft, more people, more tourists, more pollution, pretty soon this won’t be a fishing town anymore.” Mary sighed. “I’ve seen it happen in many small towns, and I can understand why people don’t want it to happen here.”

“I never really thought about all of that. In the city new

businesses popped up all the time and it didn't have much of an impact on the city. But this is different."

"So, do you still want to go to the meeting?" Mary put the last dish on the shelf.

"Yes. Yes I do. I want to show support for the town, even if it has to be silent. I don't want to pretend I don't know what is happening."

"Okay, then I'll be right there beside you," Mary said.

"Great. We'll leave around two? The meeting is at two-thirty."

"Perfect, I'll be ready."

Suzie walked back to her room to straighten up. When she stepped inside she caught sight of a photograph of Paul on her dresser and paused. The ocean was a part of Paul. He would be devastated if the beach or the wildlife in the area was damaged by a development. In that moment she understood why the people of Garber were so angry. It wasn't just about their income or economy, it was about their passions and their sense of peace being shattered, all for the sake of bright beach umbrellas and jet skis.

When it was time to leave Suzie met Mary on the front porch of Dune House.

"Any word from Neil or Priscilla?" Suzie glanced over the empty parking lot.

"They haven't been back. They must be going straight to the meeting. Do you want to drive?"

"Yes." Suzie held up her keys and gave them a brief shake. "You know I like to be behind the wheel."

The two friends drove into town to the municipal building which housed some conference rooms that the locals could reserve and use. When Suzie tried to find a parking spot there were very few to choose from.

“It looks like the meeting is having a big turn out.”

“There’s one.” Mary pointed to an empty spot. Suzie managed to park the car in the narrow space.

“Let’s get inside before there’s no room left.” Suzie led Mary down the hall towards the room that the meeting was scheduled to be held in. The door was open and voices spilled out into the hall. The meeting hadn’t started yet, but it seemed like the majority of Garber was in the room. Mary made her way inside, and Suzie stepped into the packed room just behind her. She recognized many of the people in attendance, but not all. She saw Maurice at the front of the room with his shoulders raised and tight.

“Standing room only.” Mary glanced over her shoulder at Suzie.

“We can fix that.” Suzie tapped the shoulder of a young man seated in the back row. “Hello there.” She smiled at him. He looked at her, then at Mary and nodded.

“You want to sit down?”

“My friend here would like to,” Suzie said.

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded and stood up without an argument.

“Suzie, you didn’t have to do that.” Mary frowned.

“Mary, very few perks come with age, we should take advantage of at least a few of them.”

Mary nodded with appreciation and settled into the chair. “Thank you.” She smiled at the young man who leaned against the wall. A moment later the meeting began. Suzie noticed that the entire row was filled with private business owners. She cringed as she thought of what Priscilla would face. Neil stood beside her at the front of the room, but their attitudes couldn’t have been further apart. Neil’s broad shoulders were tense, his eyes hooded, and his lips curled up in a mild sneer. Priscilla smiled at every person she made eye contact with, and appeared enthusiastic. When the meeting was turned over to her to give her speech she stepped up to the microphone with a bounce in her step.

“Hello everyone, my name is Priscilla Kane. I know many of you have done your research on me, but you should know that I am not the person that the media depicts. Yes, I am wealthy, but I am not alone in that. The towns I have worked with before have become wealthy as well, along with many of their residents. We want the people of Garber to know that what we are offering isn’t just a resort. It’s guaranteed jobs, a place on the map, and the opportunity for small business owners to truly flourish.”

“That’s not true!” Maurice shouted. He rose to his feet, as did a few other people in the room. “I’ve researched these other little towns that you’ve been to. All you do is destroy them. You hire outside help, you systematically replace small businesses with chain stores and franchises. If you build this monstrosity you will destroy Garber.”

Several shouts erupted from the crowd in support of Maurice’s words.

“Now please, just try to calm down. That doesn’t have to happen here. If we work as a team to get this project on its feet then the entire community will benefit.” Although her words were calm and soothing, it was too late. Half of the conference room was on their feet. A moment later Jason’s voice rose above the din. Suzie hadn’t even seen him come in, but he was there, just when trouble brewed, as always.

“That’s it! The meeting is over. Everyone needs to clear out,” Jason said sternly.

“It’s not over!” Maurice glared at him. “It’s not over until these people leave our town once and for all!”

“It’s over when I say it’s over, Maurice!” Jason stepped in front of him and fixed a steady glare upon him. “One more word and I’ll walk you out of here myself.”

Maurice opened his mouth to speak, but Jason held up a finger. Maurice closed his mouth. Jason waved people out of the room. Suzie and Mary were swept out the door along with the crowd.

“Good thing Jason was there.” Mary clutched her purse. “That could have gotten ugly.”

“Yes, it could have.” Priscilla paused beside them. “I guess there is a lot of anger against the resort. Hopefully we’ll be able to turn that around.” Mary looked down at her shoes. Suzie summoned a smile to her lips.

“I’m sure that you will be able to. You might want to consider some of their concerns,” Suzie said.

“Oh, yes of course I will. But first I’m going to make it clear that I have not been scared off. Suzie, I really don’t want to run off and hide. I’d like to be seen in the town after this horrible meeting. Is there a place I could go for dinner? Somewhere that the locals dine?”

“I think Cheney’s is always a great place to go. It has delicious food and the staff are always friendly.”

“That sounds great.” Priscilla met her eyes. “Hopefully the people will be welcoming.”

“You might get a few glares or looks, but in general you should be able to enjoy a meal. If not, you can always come back to Dune House and have some dinner.”

“Great. I’ll keep that in mind. I will see you later this evening.” As Priscilla walked away Suzie turned towards the parking lot. She almost walked right into Neil. He didn’t bother to excuse himself. In fact he didn’t look at her at all. He held his head high and ignored the sneers and comments of the locals as he walked past them. Suzie watched as he walked towards his car. He didn’t seem the least bit phased by what happened at the meeting.

“That was wild,” Suzie said as Mary fell into step beside her as they headed to the parking lot. “Maybe we never should have gone.”

“No, I think it’s important that we were there. Now we know what we are dealing with,” Mary said as she pulled open the passenger side door. “And so does Priscilla for that matter.”

“Neil didn’t seem to mind.” Suzie rolled her eyes. “He marched around as if he was the king of Garber.”

“I wonder if either of them even plan on living here. Priscilla mentioned that she’s done this in several different places. Why would they care what damage they do to the town?”

“You may be right, Mary. I hate to think that about Priscilla as I actually kind of like her, but there’s no arguing the fact that the community does not want this resort.”

“So? Do you think that Priscilla will bow to the pressure?”

Suzie started the car. “No Mary, I don’t think that she will. In fact she didn’t even appear to be flustered by what happened tonight. If she is used to this kind of reaction then she probably has numerous ways to deal with it.”

“And you think that we should just sit back and let her do that?” Mary gazed out the window. Suzie saw Dune House rise up before them.

“Yes. I think we should let her have her say. The worst it can do is pull the community together against a common enemy.”

“Or we could end up with a monstrous resort.”

Suzie parked a few feet away from the front walk and turned the car off. “It’s possible. But what can we really do, Mary? It’s not as if we can throw them out on the curb, that would be worse for our

reputation and they would only find someplace else to stay. If we remain neutral, we'll get the up-to-date information about the deal, and we can decide what to do then."

"Okay."

The bed and breakfast was quiet when they walked in. If Neil was there, he was silent, as was Stewart. However, Benita squawked loudly through the door of Priscilla's room.

"I don't think that bird ever sleeps." Mary shook her head. "If you don't mind, I'm going to take a nap. I have a date with Wes tonight and I'm already exhausted."

"I don't mind. Get some good rest, Mary." She gave her friend a quick hug.

When Suzie stretched out on her bed to read some of her book she could still hear the angry voices of the people at the meeting. They echoed through her thoughts, and made concentrating on the plot line quite difficult. She left her room and checked to see if any of the guests had signed up for dinner. Since none had and Mary was going out she decided to have some leftover soup. She took it out onto the side porch to eat. As she watched the waves rush and retreat she wondered whether Priscilla would have her way in the end. Could Garber really be consumed by one development deal?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

The next morning Suzie woke very early. It was too early to even prepare breakfast for the guests. She decided to take a walk along the beach. In just her socks she made her way through the house to avoid waking any of the guests or Mary. She tugged on some slip-on shoes by the door and opened it. When she stepped out onto the porch she drew a breath of the salty air.

"Morning!"

Suzie jumped and gasped. She spun around to see that Mary sat in one of the rocking chairs. "Mary, you scared me."

"I'm sorry." Mary laughed. "You should be proud of how high you can jump."

Suzie laughed as well. "I thought you were still sleeping."

"No, I guess that nap was too much for me yesterday. I've been up since five."

"How was dinner last night?"

"Amazing." Mary smiled and gazed out at the water. "Never in a million years did I think I could feel this way about a man. Well, you know what I mean."

"Huh?"

"You and Paul."

"Oh sure, I enjoy his company."

"You enjoy his company?" Mary grinned. "That's one way to put it."

"How would you put it?"

"Maybe you're in love." Mary stood up and stretched.

"I love how things are. I certainly wouldn't want them to change."

Mary caught her eye and her smile grew a little. "There's only one thing in life that doesn't change, Suzie."

“What’s that?”

“The fact that everything changes.”

“Oh, thanks for that!” Suzie rolled her eyes and laughed.

“It’s true.” Mary chuckled.

“Want to go for a walk? It’s too early to put out breakfast.”

“Sure, I’d love to.” Mary smiled.

Suzie hooked her arm through Mary’s and the pair walked down the slope of the side of the property to the beach. It was that sleepy time of morning that was filled with only the wonder of the expansive sea. As they walked along the beach a few of the locals began to emerge from their beach houses. Friendly waves were exchanged, but no one spoke, the crash of the waves was sacred. They walked towards the pier. Mary paused to pick up a seashell nestled in the sand. When she stood back up she gasped.

“What is it Mary? Are you hurt?” Suzie grabbed her arm.

“Oh no, it’s Priscilla! Suzie, it’s Priscilla.”

“What do you mean?” Suzie followed her gaze to the water. As the waves lapped at the sand Priscilla’s body rocked back and forth. Suzie lunged forward and grabbed Priscilla’s wrist to check for a pulse. When she couldn’t find one she placed her cheek close to Priscilla’s lips, but again there was no sign of life. In fact it was fairly evident that Priscilla had been dead for some time.

“Mary, call Jason!”

“I already am.” Mary’s hand shook as she held the phone against her ear. “Jason, you need to get here now, Priscilla Kane is dead.”

Suzie searched the sand and water for any clue as to what might have happened. Priscilla certainly hadn’t gone for a swim. She was fully clothed right down to her high heels. Suzie’s mind raced. She hadn’t seen Priscilla come back in the night before, but she hadn’t expected her to. Maybe if she had stayed up late enough she might have noticed the woman was missing. Sirens screamed through the air shattering the quiet morning. People on the beach stopped what they were doing and looked towards Mary and Suzie.

“Mary, we have to make sure no one gets too close. Who knows what might have happened.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Mary nodded. She walked towards the people that approached. Jason and his partner, Kirk, raced across the beach towards Suzie with medics close on their heels. A few other officers jogged behind them. When Jason stopped beside Suzie he looked from her to the body.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. We just found her like this. I checked for a pulse and breathing, but she’s gone, Jason.” One of the medics looked at Jason and shook his head sullenly to confirm that she had passed away.

“Are you okay?” Jason met her eyes with concern. “You should sit down.”

“I’m okay. I just can’t believe that this happened. Do you think someone killed her?” Jason’s attention returned to the body. He crouched down beside it and began looking it over.

“Hmm, I don’t see a mark on her. At least not visible.” Jason peered more closely at the body.

“Looks like she might have just fallen off the end of the pier into the water. Poor woman.” Kirk shook his head. “It’s a shame.”

“Is that what you really think?” Suzie frowned and crossed her arms. “I find it hard to believe that she would just slip. Why would she have been so close to the edge? Even if she fell in, why didn’t she swim to shore?”

“She had all of her clothes on. Plus the water is very deep at the end of the pier.” Jason sighed as he looked out over the water. “People, especially tourists, have no idea how powerful the waves and the pull of the ocean can be. She probably panicked. It was dark, she was scared, she might have even swum in the wrong direction. I’ve seen it before.”

“Yes, there’s no evidence of physical harm, her clothes aren’t torn that I can see. No visible head injury. Jason’s right. She likely plunged in and was too shocked or disoriented to get to shore. We’ll get the medical examiner to do an autopsy of course, but at the moment this is considered an accidental death.” Kirk shoved his hands into his pockets and growled under his breath. “The media is going to love this. After that meeting yesterday and now this, it’s going to be a circus.”

“First we need to get in touch with her family, then we’ll worry about the media.” Jason looked up at the crowd of people that began to gather. The other officers kept them back. “What’s Mary doing?”

“She was keeping everyone away. We don’t want photographs of Priscilla ending up splashed across the internet.”

“Good thinking, Suzie. Thank you.” Jason gritted his teeth. “I’m sorry to do this to you when you’ve had such a shock, but I do need

to ask you a few questions."

"Of course." Suzie nodded.

"Do you have any idea what she was up to last night? Did she mention anything to you?" Jason looked back out over the water.

"I suggested that she should have dinner at Cheney's. She wanted to be seen by the community. I thought Cheney's was a good place." Suzie frowned. "I'm not sure if she made it there or not."

"Did she mention if she was meeting anyone?"

"No, I'm sorry. It was just a brief conversation. Like I said, I don't even know if she went there."

"Well, let's find out." Jason nodded to Kirk. "See if you can get hold of any of the employees that were working last night. Let's find out if she might have had a reaction to something, or maybe she had too much to drink."

"Okay, I'll do that now." Kirk walked away while dialing a number on his cell phone. Mary made her way back to Suzie and Jason. Suzie wrapped an arm around Mary's shoulders.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so, Suzie. I just can't believe that she's dead."

"It's a shock to everyone." Jason took off his hat and ran his hand back through his hair. "I'm not sure how she could have ended up here. Mary, did you notice anything strange about her yesterday?"

"No, she seemed fine to me."

Kirk walked back towards them, his features shadowed. "According to a member of the staff at Cheney's, Ms. Kane had quite a bit to drink. Then as she left the restaurant she stumbled. I got the time of departure."

"Wow. Maybe she was so drunk that she took the wrong path. She probably thought she was headed back to Dune House and instead she was on the pier. It must have been too late once she fell into the water. She was too drunk to keep her head above water." Jason clucked his tongue.

Suzie and Mary stepped away as the two continued to discuss the death. Mary looked over at her.

"What is it, Suzie?"

"Hmm?"

"I know that look."

Suzie sighed. "I just don't think it could be true."

“What isn’t true?”

“Well, Priscilla getting drunk and walking off the pier. She was so put together. She actually came across as rather warm to me. She also didn’t seem like someone who would be so reckless.”

“You may be right. People hide their addictions well though.”

“But she didn’t even ask for wine at dinner.” Suzie narrowed her eyes. “It just doesn’t make sense to me.”

“I’m sure if something is suspicious about it, Jason will figure it out.”

“I hope so.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

By the time Suzie and Mary got back to Dune House there was no sign of the guests. They had missed breakfast, but there were no angry notes left behind. Suzie stood beside the kitchen counter and tried to think of what to do next. She was so shocked by the discovery that she couldn't get her thoughts straight. Mary leaned against the counter beside her.

"We should see that Neil is okay and make sure he knows about Priscilla's death," Suzie said. Mary bit into her bottom lip. "Don't you think he should know?"

"Yes. And I would hate for him to come to us about something before he's been informed," Mary said. "I wonder how he will take it. We should see him together. Is that okay?"

"Yes, let's just get it done, the longer we let it go the harder it will be." As they walked down the hall towards Neil's room Suzie tried to think of how to break the news. At Neil's room she knocked on the door. Mary grimaced as they waited for him to open the door. After a few moments, Suzie knocked again. Again there was no response.

"Maybe he's already out for the day?"

"Maybe." Suzie frowned. She turned away from the door and looked straight at Priscilla's room. "What about her things, Mary? I think we should get them together for her family."

"Oh, how horrible this is going to be for them. To think one night of too much drinking took her life."

"I don't know," Suzie said. "I still don't think that's what happened. Maybe I am just too paranoid, but it all seems rather strange to me."

"Hopefully we'll know the truth eventually." Mary turned the knob on the door. "It's locked." She reached into her pocket for the

keys that she always carried with her. She slid the key into the lock.

"Wait." Suzie touched her arm. "Let's just be careful when we go in. Maybe this was an accident, but something tells me that it might not have been. Jason may not need to search the room now, but if anything changes there might be evidence in here that they will need to recover."

"Good thinking." Mary opened the door. Right away the bird began to squawk. Mary walked over to the cage and lifted the cover. The bird hopped from ledge to ledge and bobbed its head anxiously. "It's okay. It's okay." Mary clucked her tongue. "Poor birdie."

"Look at this." Suzie picked up a ream of paperwork that was on the top of the dresser. "Looks like she was working hard." She started to open the folder.

"No don't. Like you said, let's leave everything just the way it is, just in case there's a problem. Other than the bird of course, we're going to have to keep her with us until someone claims her."

"I'll check for any dirty linen." Suzie opened the hamper in the closet. She was surprised to find it empty. She checked the shelf in the closet for the stack of three towels they always made sure was in each room. There was nothing on the shelf. Suzie opened the door to the small bathroom in the room and looked around. There were no towels in there either. "Did you put towels in this room, Mary?" Suzie asked as she stepped out of the bathroom.

"Yes, of course."

"Well, they're not here now. They're not in the hamper either."

"Maybe she left them in the main bathroom?" Mary said referring to the large shared guest bathroom for the floor. It had a larger shower and a bathtub.

"Maybe. I'll go check."

Suzie left Mary in the room and walked down the hall to the shared bathroom for the floor. When she reached the linen closet beside it she realized that the carpet beneath her feet was soaked. She frowned as she tried to track down where the water came from. The rest of the hallway was dry. The patch of carpet between the linen closet and the bathroom was wet. She opened the door to the bathroom and found puddles of water on the tiled floor. The towel rack was empty. Mary met her outside the door.

"What went on here?"

"It looks like one of the guests took a shower and didn't have a

towel. They must have stood in front of the linen closet to find one," Suzie said.

Mary opened the door to the linen closet. "Hm. It does look like a few towels are missing."

"I'm sure they will turn up in a wet pile in someone's room." Suzie shook her head. She knew people had different standards of cleanliness, but she hated the idea of wet towels getting moldy somewhere.

"I'll clean this up. Why don't you take the bird to the front desk? That way she will be ready when someone wants to pick her up and we can keep an eye on her."

"Sure." Suzie walked back to Priscilla's room. She picked up the birdcage and carried it to the front desk. "Here you go, don't worry I won't be long." She whistled at the bird then walked to the utility closet. She pulled out a wet dry vac that could draw the water out of the carpet. As she carted it out of the closet and down the hall the bird began to flap her wings and shriek a word.

"What is that you're saying? Pumpkin?" Suzie raised an eyebrow. The bird shrieked again. The closest word that she could think of was pumpkin. "Okay, well I don't have any pumpkin." She shook her head and continued down the hall to the bathroom. Mary finished hanging up some fresh towels in the bathroom and turned to look at Suzie. "Oh perfect, thank you," Suzie said.

"No problem. I want to make sure this is all cleaned up before any guests return. This day is already upsetting enough I don't want any slip and falls."

Once the bathroom was cleaned up Suzie was restless. Her mind kept returning to Priscilla and what might have happened to her.

"You know what I think, Mary?"

Mary stuck her head out of the kitchen. "What?"

"I think it's been far too long since we visited Dr. Rose. In fact we've been downright neglectful for not stopping by to check in on our friend."

"I think you're right." Mary smiled. "We should remedy that with a visit right now."

"I agree, Mary. We owe her a serious apology."

Mary picked up her purse and followed Suzie out the door. They drove towards the medical examiner's office. Suzie searched the sidewalks and the cars she passed for Neil but she didn't see him or his vehicle. When they reached the medical examiner's office Suzie

parked as close to the door as possible. She knew Jason would not appreciate the fact that she was checking up on the case without his knowledge so she wanted to be able to make a quick exit if she needed to. She and Mary hurried inside and were greeted by an empty waiting room. There was no receptionist at the desk. This did not surprise Suzie as Dr. Summer Rose liked to work alone and would often give the office staff the day off if she didn't think it would be a busy day.

"Maybe we should go." Mary glanced around.

"No, I'm sure she's in the back, let's just take a peek." Suzie walked towards the double doors that led out of the waiting room.

"Suzie wait, do you think we should go back there?"

"Dr. Rose?" Suzie stuck her head beyond the double doors. A medicinal scent stung her nose as she took a breath.

"I'm back here, Suzie." Her soft voice drifted from behind a second set of double doors. Suzie and Mary walked through both sets of doors to find Summer bent over a clipboard on her desk.

"Sorry to interrupt." Suzie paused a good distance from a curtain that she knew was drawn around Priscilla's body.

"It's fine," Summer said.

"I got your message." Jason's voice drew all of their attention as he walked into the room. His eyes met Summer's for a long moment as they both smiled at each other. "Suzie, Mary!"

"We just wanted to say hello to Summer, since we were passing by," Suzie said quickly before Jason could question why they were there. She didn't want him to think they were trying to find out information about the death behind his back, even though they were.

"Really?" Jason said in disbelief. "Well, it's good that you're here. I think you might need to hear this." He looked at Summer.

"I have to say this is one of my most surprising and frustrating cases." Summer sighed.

"An accidental drowning?" Mary raised an eyebrow.

"I wish," Summer said. "That's what it was supposed to be, but there's a few problems with that assessment."

"Was she dead before she went into the water? No water in her lungs?" Suzie asked.

"Oh, there's plenty of water in her lungs, but she was definitely dead before she went into the water, for the second time."

"What?" Jason narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

“As I expected she drowned, however, when I tested the water in her lungs it was not salt water.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Mary frowned.

“No, it doesn’t. It appears that she drowned elsewhere and ended up in the ocean. Which means that unless she drowned, got up and walked to the ocean, someone moved her body. So, we are at the very least looking at someone moving the body, but judging by some of the bruises that have begun to arise on her skin, it was a homicide.”

“So, someone drowned her somewhere else and then dumped her in the ocean?” Mary cleared her throat. “That is horrible.”

“Yes, it is. Unfortunately, because of her being in two different kinds of water for a long time there is little to no DNA evidence remaining on her body, or her clothes.” She gestured to the plastic bag of Priscilla’s clothing. Suzie looked at them through the plastic. She noticed that one of the shoes had a broken heel.

“Did you notice this, Summer? Her heel is broken.”

“I did.”

“Maybe that was why she stumbled out of the restaurant.” Mary snapped her fingers. “She wasn’t drunk, she stumbled because she broke her heel.”

“Yes that’s possible. Although there was alcohol in her system it was nowhere near the level that would cause severe intoxication. I think we can safely say that she was maybe a little tipsy, but nothing more than that. Also, we are waiting for more results, but preliminary tests show there were no drugs in her system. In fact Priscilla was quite healthy for her age.” Summer sighed as she looked up at Jason. “I’m afraid I’m not going to be much help on this case. That’s why it’s frustrating. Now that we know that it’s likely a murder I’d love to find some evidence, but even her fingernails have been washed clean from being under the water. I have no idea if she attacked the person who killed her. I wish I had more to go on.”

“Are you able to tell where the water came from?” Jason asked thoughtfully. “Maybe that would give us a clue.”

“I am getting some tests run on it, which will take time. The best way to tell is to have a sample to compare it to. Pinpointing the exact location is going to be difficult because most of the evidence has been washed away by the extended period of time in the water.”

“Extended?” Suzie looked over at her. “How long do you think she was in the water?”

“Oh, at least eight hours. I’m placing the time of death around nine or ten. Maybe a little later, maybe a little earlier.”

“So, a while after she left the restaurant,” Jason said. “We are going to need to ramp up our investigation. It’s officially a homicide, which means we’re going to need to search her room, speak to everyone she had contact with, including you Suzie, and Mary.” He patted the curve of Summer’s shoulder. “Thanks for the quick catch on this. We’ve already lost a lot of time.”

“I wish I could tell you more, Jason,” Summer said.

“I might have something of interest.” Suzie frowned. “There was someone snooping around Dune House the day that Priscilla checked in.”

“Who?” Jason turned to face her. “Why am I just hearing about this now?” His voice tightened.

“Wait a minute, this morning this was an accidental death, nothing more, why would I mention it?” Suzie said defensively.

“Maybe because I stopped by to specifically check on you?” Jason raised an eyebrow.

“Look, Maurice is a businessman, I understand why he was upset. I didn’t think too much of it, but now, I don’t want to hold anything back about it.”

“Maurice Lungdley, the same man that I had to escort out of the community meeting?”

“Yes. I can’t see him doing this, but I thought you should know.”

“Thank you, Suzie. I appreciate that.” He sighed. “If you think of anything else, please don’t hesitate to tell me. This entire case is going to turn into a big mess once word gets out that it’s murder. At least I have somewhere to start. Maurice Lungdley.” Jason spun on his heel. “I’d better get over there and find out where he was last night.”

“Be careful, Jason, he can be temperamental,” Suzie called out.

“Don’t I know it. Have you seen Neil Runkin? We’ve been trying to get hold of him all morning.” Jason shook his head.

“He wasn’t at Dune House this morning.”

“Well, let me know when you do see him. I want to speak to him.”

“Sure,” Suzie said. Jason paused at the door and looked back at Suzie.

“Don’t forget to let me know when Paul gets in. Okay?”

“I won’t forget.” Suzie smiled.

After Jason left, Mary looked over at Suzie. “What’s that about?”

“Who knows? Maybe they’re trying to bond?” Suzie shrugged.

Summer laughed. “I’d like to be a fly on the wall for that.”

“Me too.” Mary stifled a laugh. She glanced at her watch. “Oh dear, we’d better go check on Benita, maybe her food has run out and she’s hungry.”

“I also want to see if Neil is back yet. It seems odd that he hasn’t heard of Priscilla’s death yet and come to Dune House to sort things out.”

“Maybe he did and he doesn’t know how to handle it. He doesn’t seem like a man who is too in touch with his emotions.”

“I can agree with you on that.” Suzie rolled her eyes. “Let’s check up on Stewart, too. He’s been awfully quiet.”

“Good idea. When he gets wind of all of this it might spook him.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

As Suzie and Mary drove back to Dune House, Garber appeared more somber. Suzie wondered if word had already gotten around about the true cause of Priscilla's death. She knew that in a small town like Garber bad news spread fast and scandalous news spread like wildfire. When they pulled into the parking lot at Dune House Suzie noticed that Neil's car was still not in the parking lot. She and Mary walked up to the door and stepped inside. It was uncomfortable for Suzie to think about the woman who would never collect her luggage or her beloved bird.

"I guess he's still not here."

"I'm going to make us some lunch. We didn't even have breakfast."

Suzie nodded. "I'm not sure if I can eat."

"You're going to have to. It's important."

"I know, I know." Suzie frowned. She walked over to the front desk as Mary disappeared into the kitchen. Suzie picked up the phone and dialed the number for Stewart's room. After the third ring he answered.

"What is it?"

"I'm just checking in to see if you are doing okay today."

"Ah, because of Priscilla?"

"You've heard."

"Who hasn't?"

"I want to assure you that everything is being done to find the person responsible."

"I'm sure it is. But I have to say that this doesn't feel much like a vacation anymore. I'm going to check out tomorrow morning."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I wish your departure was under better circumstances."

“It’s quite all right. I’ve enjoyed my visit here, but I don’t want to be caught up in the middle of a murder investigation. It’s a shame, a real shame.”

“Yes, it is. Please let me know if there’s anything I can do, or anything you might need.”

“Thank you. I won’t be attending dinner tonight. I have plans to meet someone for dinner.”

“Okay, thank you, Stewart.”

“Thank you, Suzie. Don’t worry, I intend to visit again.”

“Great.” Suzie sighed with relief as she hung up the phone. The last thing she needed was a bad review spread throughout the community because of something that she had no control over.

“Pumpkin! Pumpkin!”

“Ugh.” Suzie rolled her eyes. “All right, all right. I’ll feed you.” Suzie walked over to the birdcage and opened the door to refill the food dish. As she filled it she heard footsteps approach from behind her.

“What’s Benita doing down here?”

Suzie turned around to find Neil dressed in the same clothes that he wore the day before. “Neil, have the police contacted you?”

“The police? No. Why would they?”

Suzie frowned. “Neil, I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but Priscilla Kane has passed away.”

“Has what?” Neil’s eyes widened. “She’s dead?”

“Yes, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Are you sure?” His brows knitted together and Suzie thought for just a moment that he might begin to cry. Instead he shook his head. “I didn’t think anything could kill that woman.” Suzie raised an eyebrow. That wasn’t exactly the reaction she expected.

“We’re taking care of her bird until we’re able to contact family. Unless of course you would like to have Benita with you.”

“No, absolutely not. That feathery beast never quietens down.” He scowled at the bird. The bird flapped its wings at him. “So, what was it? A heart attack or something?”

“No, I’m afraid she drowned.”

“Drowned? She didn’t even like to swim, that I knew about. Well, I guess I didn’t really know if she liked to swim or not.”

“No, she didn’t drown while swimming. She was intentionally drowned. Neil, she was murdered.”

“Murdered?” Neil took a step back. His face grew pale. “Are you

sure about that?"

"Yes, Sir." Suzie reached for a box of tissues. "If there's anything that Mary and I can do to help, please don't be afraid to ask."

His face grew red as he glared at the box of tissues. Instead of grabbing a tissue his eyes fluttered as he looked away. He grabbed the edge of the front desk to steady himself. "Am I in any danger?"

"I don't believe so. Why would you think that?" Suzie grabbed his elbow to steady him.

"Well, if someone killed Priscilla I'm guessing it was someone from around here, someone who wanted to stop the resort from being built. They might be after me, too. Don't you think?"

"I'll tell you what, I'll call my cousin, he's a police officer. He can give you a better idea of whether you might be a target."

"Oh sure, local police. No, I think I'll be hiring a bodyguard until I can get out of this town." He narrowed his eyes. "I'll be checking out first thing in the morning."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Neil, but I certainly understand. In the meantime if there is anything that you need please feel free to ask."

"What could I possibly need from you?" Suzie watched as he walked away. "Someone in this backwards town is going to pay, I promise you that." She heard him slam the door to his room. The abrupt sound caused a shiver to race along her spine. Maybe Neil didn't know how to express his grief, but he certainly knew how to express his anger.

"Suzie, lunch is ready!" Mary stuck her head out of the kitchen to get her friend's attention. Suzie, still a little startled from Neil's behavior, joined her friend in the kitchen.

"Well, I just told Neil what happened," Suzie said as she walked into the kitchen.

"Oh? Was that the slam I heard?"

"Yes. I don't think he was the least bit pleased. He seemed just as angry as he was upset."

"People react to things differently." Mary placed a grilled cheese with freshly sliced tomato on the bench in front of Suzie. All of a sudden Suzie was hungry, very hungry.

"Oh, that reminds me, I'd better let Jason know that Neil is here." She sent Jason a text. After a few bites of her sandwich she heard a knock on the door, then the door swung open.

"Suzie?" Jason called out as he stepped into the lobby. Suzie stole another bite of her sandwich then excused herself.

“Jason, you got my text?”

“Yes. Is Neil still here?”

“Yes, he is in his room. Room six.”

“All right.” He walked down the hall towards the room.

“Jason, he didn’t take it well.”

Jason spun on his heel to look at her. “You already told him?”

“Yes.” Suzie frowned. “Is that a problem?”

“I would have liked to see his initial reaction myself. So yes, it is a bit of a problem. I wish you had waited until I arrived.”

“I’m sorry, Jason, I thought he should know as soon as possible,” Suzie said. “He was wondering why Benita was downstairs and I couldn’t lie.”

“It’s all right.” Jason sighed. He knocked on the door of Neil’s room. There was no response. Jason knocked again. Again there was no response.

“Are you sure he’s here?”

“I didn’t see him leave.” Suzie stepped past him and tried the door knob. The room was locked. “Neil?” She knocked on the door. “Neil, are you in there?”

Jason frowned when there was no answer. “Can you open it?”

“Sure.” Suzie pulled the keys out of her pocket and unlocked the door to the room. When the door swung open the room was spotless, and also empty. The bed was made and the furniture was neatly arranged. Jason started to step inside.

“Jason, what are you doing?”

“I was just going to take a quick look around.”

“No.”

“What?” Jason turned to look at her.

“Neil’s my guest. I can’t just let you into his room.”

“You did unlock it for me.” He crossed his arms.

“Yes, but that’s because I thought Neil might be hurt. Not to let you snoop through his things.”

“Really? You’re going to lecture me about snooping?” Jason laughed.

“Jason. I’m serious.”

His smile faded as he looked at her. “Suzie, Neil could be involved in this. I might be able to find a lead if I look around.”

“Do you have any reason to suspect him?”

“None. But business partners are often involved in disputes. Are you really going to deny me the chance to find evidence?”

“We don’t even know where Neil is. I didn’t see him leave.”

“He must have slipped out when you weren’t looking. Where he is doesn’t matter as much as why is he sneaking around?” Jason peered at a pile of papers on a table.

“Jason.” Suzie frowned. “I’m not comfortable with this.”

“I’ll remember that the next time you want me to give you information about someone.” He raised an eyebrow.

Suzie sighed. “All right, fine. But you know as well as I do that anything you find without a warrant can’t be used against Neil.”

“Why would anything be used against me?” Neil stood in the hall just behind Suzie. “Why are you in my room without my permission?”

Suzie cringed.

“I was looking for you, Mr. Runkin, to discuss the murder of Priscilla Kane,” Jason said as he stood tall and walked towards him.

“Are you accusing me of something? What right do you have to be in my room?” Neil glared at Suzie. “Did you let him in here? You did, didn’t you?”

“I thought you might be hurt.” Suzie frowned. “I thought you were inside and not answering.”

“Oh, now you have so much concern for your guests? Where was that concern when Priscilla was missing all night?” He chuckled. “And look who’s here. Junior Deputy Dogood.”

“Junior what?” Jason narrowed his eyes.

“You want to look around my room without a warrant?” Neil stepped into the room with Jason. “Feel free. I have nothing to hide. Priscilla and I were business partners, that’s it.”

Suzie’s stomach churned as she watched the two men face off. She couldn’t help but feel that she was somehow responsible for the fireworks of tension between them.

“Why don’t we start with you telling me where you were last night?” Jason pulled out his notebook.

“I wasn’t here.” Neil shrugged. “I was being entertained by a lady friend.”

“A lady friend? It wasn’t Priscilla?”

“Please.” Neil scowled. “After the meeting I met a woman on the beach, and well, she appreciated my plan for the future of Garber.”

“What was the name of this woman?” Jason looked up from his notepad.

“You really think I’m going to tell you that so you can smear her

reputation? No. I have no reason to tell you who I was with. I was not here, and I was not with Priscilla. That's all that you need to know."

"So, you're not interested in cooperating with this investigation?"

"What I'm not interested in is dealing with a small town cop who has no idea what he is doing. For all future contact you can go through my lawyer. If you don't mind I'd like you to leave my room. I need to pack."

"I'll be in contact with you soon, Mr. Runkin." Though Jason's tone was polite Suzie could see the squint of his eyes and the tension in his jaw. He stepped out of the room. Neil promptly closed the door behind him. They both heard the click of the lock. Jason gestured towards the living room. Suzie followed after him. He did not speak until they were outside on the porch together.

"That guy is a real piece of work."

"Yes, he is." Suzie folded her arms across her chest.

"I'm sorry that I've gotten you into a problem with him. But I do think there's good reason to suspect him. He refuses to give an alibi."

"He did come back today with the same clothes he wore yesterday," Suzie paused. "Actually, he must have changed between the time he came in and the time we saw him. His clothes were different."

"Interesting. Maybe he took a shower. That might have been why he was not in his room."

"His hair wasn't wet."

"Maybe he didn't wash it." Jason shrugged. "Either way, I'm going to see about getting a warrant. I want to know what is in his room that he didn't want me to see."

Suzie nodded. "I'll keep an eye out."

"Please do." He started to walk away, then stopped and turned back. "No Paul yet?"

"Probably not until tomorrow. Is everything okay, Jason? You've been asking about him a lot."

"Sure, everything's fine." Jason glanced away.

"What is it?"

"Nothing Suzie."

"Is it about me?" Suzie's heart dropped.

"It's nothing bad, Suzie." Jason smiled at her. "At least I don't

think it is. I just need to talk to him when he gets in, all right?"

"All right." Suzie waved to him as he walked to the parking lot.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

A few hours later Suzie was so restless that she decided it was time to do some investigating of her own. It was the only way she could get herself to calm down. She paced back and forth through the living room as she began to carve out a plan.

"Suzie?" Mary nearly collided with her as she walked into the living room. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I think so. Neither Neil nor Stewart has signed up for dinner, so do you want to go out for dinner tonight?"

"Wes is taking me out to dinner again tonight. Do you want to join us instead?"

"No, thank you." Suzie smiled. "I'll be back by eight."

"Okay, I won't be." Mary grinned. "I'm hoping we will go for a walk after. Although, we might just avoid the beach."

"I don't blame you for that. Have fun. I will be on call in case any of the guests need anything. All right?"

"Great. See you later, Suzie."

"See you later." Suzie stepped out of the front door of Dune House and walked over to her car. With every step she took she had a strange sensation that something might just pop out at her. She looked around the property a few times, but didn't notice anything strange, aside from a window that was off track. She tried to tug it back into place, but it was wedged. She made a mental note to ask Paul for help with it when he docked.

When Suzie arrived at Cheney's it was as busy as ever. Suzie swept her gaze over the wait staff in search of familiar faces. Though she didn't often dine out, when she did it was usually with Paul at Cheney's. She had also become familiar with the employees from the restaurant and from running into them from time to time in town.

“Melissa!” Suzie waved to a young waitress who had just walked away from a large table of diners.

“Suzie.” She smiled as she walked over to her. “Where’s Paul?”

“A table for one tonight I’m afraid. Anything good on the menu?”

“Everything’s good on the menu.” Melissa winked at her. “Just a minute and I’ll get you a table by the window.”

“Thanks, Melissa.”

As Suzie waited for her table she noticed a familiar face in the crowd. It took her a moment to remember who he was. Priscilla’s driver. He glanced over at her, but didn’t seem to recognize her. Then he settled in at the bar. Suzie walked over to him and leaned against the bar beside him.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

He looked up at her. “Sure, I guess. You’re from the bed and breakfast, right?”

“Yes. I’m sorry about Priscilla.”

“Yes. That was a shock. My boss wants me to wait here until the matter is settled, so I’m staying.”

“In the motel right?”

“Yes.”

“I know the owner. Is he taking care of you well?”

“Sure, I guess. Clean towels, a working television, what more can you ask for?”

“I’m Suzie by the way. I don’t think I caught your name.”

“It’s Conner.”

“Conner, did you notice anything strange happening around the motel?”

“Strange?” He shrugged. “You mean other than the people?”

“What was strange about the people?”

“Just you know, some seedy types.”

“Sure.” Suzie nodded. “Anything other than that? Maybe someone arguing or something?”

“There was some arguing about money. I don’t know who it was though. It sounded like two guys. I didn’t see either of them, I was in my room. But I could hear them out in the parking lot.”

“Did you tell the police?”

“No reason to. I didn’t think it had anything to do with Priscilla, still don’t. They didn’t mention her or anything.”

“What about family?”

“Look, I don’t know anything about her. All I did was drive, and like I said, she was private. I didn’t get to know her.”

“All right.” Suzie glanced towards Melissa who signaled to an empty table. “Thanks for your time, Conner.”

“No problem.” He returned to his drink. Suzie didn’t think he was telling her everything. She settled at the table and ordered a glass of wine. As she relaxed into her seat she studied the others gathered in the restaurant. It was eerie to think that Priscilla had her last meal in the restaurant, if she even ate. When Melissa returned with Suzie’s wine, she placed her order for ravioli. Then she gestured to the empty chair across from her.

“Can you sit for a minute?”

Melissa glanced around at her tables, then plopped down in the empty chair. “Just for a few minutes.”

“Melissa, do you remember serving Priscilla Kane last night?”

“Sure. It’s crazy that she died. I mean, I was just talking to her.”

“Did you notice anything strange about her last night? Was she upset?”

“Not at first. She came in, I seated her, then I seated her friend.”

“Her friend? She was dining with someone?”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell the police that?”

“Well no. No one asked. It was busy when they questioned us so I guess that it just slipped my mind.”

“Do you know who he was?”

“No, it wasn’t a he. It was a young woman. And when they first sat down they were cordial to each other. I took their order, but before I could even bring them their food, they started arguing.”

“Just a little back and forth?”

“No it was more than that. Raised voices. Slammed silverware. I was close to tossing them out.”

“Did you hear what they were saying?”

“Not really. Something like, you don’t understand, you’re too young to get it. Then the young woman went on this rant about how Priscilla was selfish, how she couldn’t ever see past herself, and that would never change. Then she stormed out.”

“Are you sure there was nothing else?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“What about payment? Did the other woman pay for the check?”

“No, Priscilla paid for all of it. She left not long after that.”

“Was she drunk?”

“She had some drinks, but I think she was more upset than drunk.”

“Did you see her leave?”

“Yes, she kind of stumbled out the door.” Melissa glanced back at the big table. “I’m sorry I have to check in on them.”

“It’s no problem, you’ve been very helpful.” Suzie made a note on her napkin about the woman who shared a meal with Priscilla. At the very least she was someone to look into.

When Suzie finished her meal she left payment and a tip on the table and walked towards the door. She noticed that Conner was still at the bar. He nursed a beer, but kept his eyes on the door. Suzie looked towards the door just in time to see Neil step through it. He didn’t notice Suzie, but walked right up to Conner. The two spoke too quietly for Suzie to hear. She frowned as she continued out the door.

It seemed rather interesting that Neil, who only liked fancy places and people would go out of his way to a small Italian restaurant, and speak to a lowly driver. As Suzie drove back to Dune House she wondered whether Mary’s night had been pleasant. She hoped that it had. When she parked she saw that Dune House was dark, but for the two lights that they always left on. The porch light and the living room light. That either meant that Mary was home and asleep, or still out with Wes. Suzie made her way into Dune House through the front door. She knew that Neil would not be there, and she presumed that Stewart would be tucked away in his room. As she walked through the living room towards the front desk she heard a subtle flutter.

“Pumpkin! Pumpkin!”

“Oh dear, not this again.” Suzie paused in front of the cage. “What’s wrong, Benita, are you hungry?” She made sure the bird’s water and food dish were full. But the bird continued to shriek. “Pumpkin! Pumpkin!”

“Hmm, something tells me you like Halloween.” Suzie shook her head. “I can’t have you keeping our guests awake. I guess you will have to come with me.” She picked up the cage and carried it into her room. She set the cage down on a table near the window. Then she draped a thin blanket over the top of the cage to get the bird to settle down. In the silence that followed she took a deep breath. She

knew that Paul would be getting in sometime the next day. She looked forward to seeing him, but she couldn't be too excited with the weight of Priscilla's death hanging over her head. Who was the woman she met with in the restaurant? Why was Neil so cagey?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

When Suzie woke the next morning the first thought on her mind was Paul. He would be arriving at any time that day. She smiled at the thought. The second thought was about Priscilla and what might have happened to her. She decided that the most important thing was to find out who was having dinner with Priscilla the night she died. That person might be the only person that knew exactly what happened to Priscilla. From what Melissa said she assumed the woman was much younger than Priscilla. She decided that she would attempt to ask Neil about her. She dressed and then headed for the front desk. She knew that both Stewart and Neil planned on checking out that morning. Mary already had coffee brewing.

"Did you get in late last night?" Suzie smiled at her.

"Quite late. Actually, I do have something to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Wes and I decided to walk through town instead of on the beach. We bumped into Carl, you know, he runs the pharmacy? Anyway, we started talking about the tragedy of Pricilla's death. He mentioned that he had seen Priscilla, and another woman, walking through town together."

"Really." Suzie raised an eyebrow. "Melissa, the waitress at Cheney's told me that Priscilla ate with a woman the night of her death, but she said they argued."

"According to Carl they walked arm in arm. He noticed because it seemed a little strange to him, one of the women appeared much younger than the other. He didn't say they were arguing."

"Interesting, interesting." Suzie pursed her lips. "I guess we should tell Jason about this." Before she could even pull out her phone Neil walked up to the front desk. He dropped his bag on the floor with a thump.

“I’m checking out.”

“Neil, I’m very sorry…”

“I don’t have time for this. Just do what you need to do to get me checked out of this place quickly.”

Suzie nodded. She began filling out the last of the paperwork. “Neil, did Priscilla have any friends that were young women?”

“What?” He scowled at her. “I just want to check out.”

“I was just wondering, if you knew of a young woman that she might associate with?” Suzie asked.

“The only friend she had was that damn bird, all right? Now, let’s go.” He tapped the desk.

“I just need your signature in these two places.” Suzie pointed out the two spots on the paperwork. Neil signed the papers with two sharp strokes of his pen.

“There.” He picked up his bag and strode across the room and out the front door of Dune House. Suzie jumped at how hard he slammed the door.

“Wow, good riddance.” Mary shook her head.

“Yes, well when he posts a scathing review on our website, we’re going to care.” Suzie sighed. “I’m sure there was a better way I could have handled that.”

“Try not to worry about it. He might not even leave a review.”

“Well, I will.” Stewart smiled as he walked up to the desk. “I really enjoyed my stay here, ladies. I’m sorry that I have to cut it short.”

“Stewart, I wish there was more we could have done to make you feel more comfortable,” Mary said.

“To be honest with you, it’s my guilt that is making me leave.”

“Your guilt?” Mary leaned forward with interest. “Guilt about what?”

“Well, maybe if I had said something to Priscilla when I saw her, maybe if I had asked if she was okay. It was just that with the way she was limping, I figured she was drunk.”

“Limping?” Suzie narrowed her eyes. “Wait a minute, when did you see Priscilla, Stewart?”

“Oh, the night she died. I saw her walking down the hall towards her room. I wish I would have asked if she was okay. Maybe if I offered to keep her company or something. Maybe she would still be alive if I had.”

“It’s not your fault, Stewart.” Mary touched the back of his hand.

“No one could have known what would happen.”

“No Stewart, it’s not your fault. But you may have been the last person to see Priscilla alive. I think it’s important that you speak to Jason.” Suzie picked up one of the business cards that she kept on the desk. “Please contact him and let him know what you saw.”

“Oh wow, really? I didn’t realize that.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Suzie, but like I said before, I don’t want to get in the middle of a murder investigation.”

“Stewart, you have to tell the police what you saw.” Mary met his eyes.

“No. I don’t. Now, please, I’d like to check out.”

Suzie handed him the paper to sign. She was mystified as to why he wouldn’t want to speak to the police about what he saw. She began to look at Stewart in a different way. He was withdrawn, hadn’t spoken to Neil or Priscilla even once that she had seen, and had checked in the day before they arrived. Was it possible that he had been watching them the entire time? As he signed the paperwork he smiled.

“Please check for my glowing review, ladies. I will be back.” He picked up his suitcase and walked towards the door. Suzie pulled out her cell phone and fired off a fast text to Jason about Stewart that warned him Stewart was about to leave town and he should be questioned before he did. Jason sent a text back that requested her presence at the police station. Suzie sighed.

“It looks like I’m going to have to go see Jason in person about this. Mary, since we don’t have any more guests, do you want to join me?”

“Actually, I was thinking of walking into town and going to the library. You know how Louis knows the history of everyone in town and how good he is at researching people. I thought he might be able to find out who that woman is that was with Priscilla.”

“Good plan. Are you sure you don’t want a lift?” Suzie offered.

“No, I could use the fresh air.”

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll meet you there after I talk to Jason. Okay?” Suzie said.

“Sure.”

Suzie grabbed her purse and keys, but as she was about to walk out the door Mary stopped her with a travel mug of coffee and a muffin.

“It’s important.” She raised an eyebrow.

“Thank you, Mary.”

Suzie hurried out the door to her car. She wondered why Jason wanted to see her in person. As she drove towards the police station she glanced at the clock on the dashboard. She hadn’t yet heard from Paul that he had docked. That was a little odd, but she assumed that he must have been delayed for some reason. When she looked away from the clock she caught sight of the jewelry store, and a man who looked just like Paul was opening the door to it. Her heart skipped a beat. Paul was not the type of man to browse in a jewelry store. He also had not called to let her know that he was on dry land. She glanced in the rearview mirror, but the man was already gone.

“I must have been mistaken.” She parked the car in the police station parking lot and walked inside. Jason and Kirk stood near Jason’s desk. Suzie couldn’t hear what they were saying, but their expressions were grave.

“Jason?” Suzie waited for him near the front desk. Jason waved her back.

“Did you see my text about Stewart?”

“Yes, I did. We have a big problem. I hope that the guys on patrol can catch him.”

“Why is that?” Suzie looked past them at the computer screen. “Stewart has a record?”

“Yes. For assault. On an elderly woman.” He scowled. “I can’t believe I missed it. He was on my list of people I needed to question. I just hadn’t caught up with him yet.”

“He was so polite and quiet. I certainly didn’t think that there was anything to be concerned about,” Suzie said.

“What changed that?”

“Well, he told me that he saw Priscilla the night of the murder, going back to her room. I told him that he should contact you as he was likely one of the last people to see Priscilla alive. He refused. In fact he even checked out because there was an investigation. He must have known that he would be a prime suspect or he was concerned because he is the murderer.”

“Are you sure he saw her that night? Maybe it was another night?”

“No. I don’t think so. He said he thought she was drunk because she was limping.”

“Like when she stumbled out of the restaurant,” Jason said.

“Yes, this is a good lead, I just wish we had caught him before he left.”

“I’m sorry, I texted you as soon as I suspected.”

“I appreciate that, Suzie.”

“Oh, by the way Paul should be getting in today.”

“I already talked to him.” Jason looked back at the computer screen. “Suzie, I may need to ask you and Mary some more questions about Stewart.”

“Uh huh.” Suzie’s mind reeled, not from Stewart being a suspect, but from Paul’s arrival. Why hadn’t he called to tell her that he was back? Maybe that had been him at the jewelry shop. She gripped her phone for a moment. She thought about calling him, but she knew she would be heartbroken if he didn’t answer. Maybe he wasn’t as eager to see her as she was to see him. It hurt her to think it, but Suzie always did her best to come to the logical conclusion. There must be a good reason why Paul would go out of his way to contact Jason, but not even bother to text her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

Suzie was still trying to think of a reason why Paul wouldn't call her when she left the police station and drove to the library. She sat in her car for a few minutes while she waited for her emotions to settle. Every minute that slipped by without Paul calling her made her sink deeper into confusion. She tried to figure out if she'd done or said anything to upset him. As she recalled when they said goodbye before he left on his trip everything was just fine. Short of a mermaid she couldn't imagine who he could have met while out on the water.

Suzie shook her head and tried to focus her attention on the case. Although Jason appeared to be convinced that he had his man, Suzie was not so sure. Why would Stewart stay for as long as he had if he was involved? Why had he been so kind? Perhaps to throw them off?

Suzie opened the car door and stepped out. The library was not very crowded as it was still early in the day. When she stepped inside she saw Louis and Mary hunched together around one of the computers. With a bright smile on her lips she walked up to them.

"Morning."

"Morning." Louis peered through his thick glasses at her.

"Were you able to find anything?" Suzie maintained her smile.

"Louis is amazing." Mary patted his shoulder. "He did an image search on Priscilla to see if he could find any pictures of her with a young woman. He did."

"Yes, I did. Ladies, let me introduce Leanne Kay, formerly known as Leanne Kane, until she changed her name on her eighteenth birthday."

Suzie leaned over Louis' shoulder and peered at the computer screen. An image of Priscilla accompanied by a tall, young woman

with a blonde ponytail popped up on the screen.

"She has a daughter?"

"Yes. Not just any daughter. She has a hardcore modern day hippie daughter."

"Flowerchild?" Mary raised an eyebrow.

"Not these days. They're called tree huggers nowadays. There's a large global environmentalist movement and it grows every day. Priscilla's daughter is a rising star in the movement. She's been to several high-risk environments for the purpose of rescuing endangered species from war-torn areas or global developments."

"So Priscilla, who's all about profit not about protecting the environment, has a daughter that wants to save the world," Mary said.

"I imagine that they didn't get along very well, I mean her daughter changed her last name." Louis tapped the screen. "I found one article where Priscilla is questioned about her daughter and she has a pretty powerful response. And I quote, 'I raised her, provided her with all that she needed, and now she is her own person. I wouldn't expect anything less from her.' So basically stating they have nothing to do with each other."

"Or that she's proud of her independent-minded daughter." Mary crossed her arms. "I find it hard to believe that Priscilla was as detached as she claimed."

"Not everyone is as loving a mother as you, Mary." Suzie sighed. "Maybe Priscilla wasn't the mothering type."

"Maybe." Mary narrowed her eyes. "But the way she doted on that bird tells me that she is quite nurturing. That is the mothering type."

"Good point," Suzie agreed. "I didn't think about that. What about the father?"

"Actually, there's no father that I can find. It looks like Leanne was the product of a single mother by choice."

"What do you mean?" Mary furrowed her brow.

"He means that Priscilla hit up a sperm bank when she was ready to be a mommy."

Mary's eyes widened. "I wish I had thought of that."

"Mary!" Suzie laughed.

"It would have saved me some trouble." Mary smirked.

"Oh, look at this." Louis smiled. "I think I just won the lottery."

"What is it?" Suzie looked back at the computer.

“It looks like Leanne was, and may still be in town. She came here to defend the seabirds that may be affected by her mother’s vast development. Apparently, they nest along Redhawk River and since it’s so close to the construction zone, they will be impacted.”

“That must have been who she argued with at the restaurant! Of course. Only a mother and daughter can fight like that.”

“So, if she was at dinner with her mother last night, then she is probably staying here in town. The funny thing is, I don’t recall seeing her at the community meeting. Do you, Mary?” Suzie asked.

“No, but it did get pretty chaotic. Maybe we just didn’t notice her?”

“I don’t think Leanne is the type to be seen and not heard.” Louis clicked the print button and the printer sprang to life. “I’ll give you a copy of her photograph so you can keep an eye out for her.”

“I can give it to Jason.” Suzie took the paper from the printer. “Thanks.”

“Are you sure you want to tell Jason right away? Maybe we should see if we can find her first,” Mary suggested.

“Why?” Suzie met her eyes. “Is something wrong, Mary?”

“If Leanne didn’t kill her mother, then she may not even know that her mother is dead, yet. I’d hate for her first introduction to that news to be a pair of handcuffs.”

“Subtlety is not Jason’s strong suit.” Suzie pulled out her phone. “It will make his job easier if we track her down first anyway.”

“If she killed her mother she probably hopped the first plane out of town,” Mary said.

“Maybe.” Suzie tilted her head back and forth. “And maybe not.” She waited for someone to pick up the line.

“Hello?”

“Hi Maurice, I have a question for you.”

“Suzie? Suzie Allen?”

“Yes.”

“How dare you call me!”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your cousin was here accusing me of murder. How do you like that?”

“I had to tell him that you were at Dune House, but I certainly didn’t tell him that you were a murderer.”

“Oh no? That’s funny, because while he was here he certainly

seemed convinced of my guilt, all because of you."

"I'm sorry I don't mean to correct you, Maurice, but I think that was much more because of you. After all you decided to sneak around Dune House. You almost started a riot at the community meeting. You gave Jason all the reason to suspect you. I didn't do any of that."

"Sure, I'll remember to ask you the next time I need someone to throw me under a bus, since you already have so much experience at it."

Suzie rolled her eyes. "Maurice, stop! If you're so worried about being arrested then you should be happy to help me. Can you please tell me if Leanne Kay stayed at your motel or is currently staying there?"

"I don't want to help you with anything."

"Don't you hang up, Maurice. You're the prime suspect. You say that you didn't kill Priscilla, I believe you. But that means we need a new suspect. So answer the question."

"All right fine. Yes, she is staying here. Checked in three days ago."

"Is she still there now?"

"I don't know if she's in her room or not, but she hasn't checked out."

"Great. If she tries to check out, stall her."

"Stall her?"

"Yes Maurice, chat, try to have a friendly conversation, you know?"

"I don't know. I don't want any part in this."

"You're already in it, Maurice. Please, just stall her."

"All right, all right." He groaned. "How soon can you be here?"

"About ten minutes."

"I'll do what I can, but I'm not making any promises, Suzie."

"Thanks, Maurice." Suzie hung up the phone.

"What are you planning, Suzie?" Mary looked over at her.

"I'm just going to see if I can speak to Leanne. See what she knows and try to work out if she was involved in this."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"I think that might be a good idea. You're much more sensitive to these things than I am."

"Thanks for your help, Louis." Mary smiled at him. "You did good."

“I do what I can.” Louis grinned. “Just do me a favor and let me know how it all turns out.”

As Suzie and Mary left the library, Suzie frowned. “I think that Jason is going to be pretty upset if he finds out we kept this from him, so we better make this fast.”

“I think it’s the right thing to do. Leanne may be a suspect in Jason’s eyes, but to me, she’s a daughter, who might not even know her mother is dead, let alone that she was murdered,” Mary said. “Come, let’s go. You might hear from Paul soon and then you’ll have other things to do.” Mary grinned. Suzie’s smile faded. She glanced away from Mary.

“You may be right about that.”

“Suzie?” Mary grabbed her arm gently. “What’s wrong?”

“Huh? Nothing is wrong.” Suzie shrugged. “We’d better hurry.”

“No way, don’t you take one step until you tell me what is going on.” Mary crossed her arms.

“Mary, I said nothing is wrong.”

“And I know you’re lying to me, which you never do, so it must be something very serious. What’s going on, Suzie? Tell me.”

“It’s nothing really. It’s just that Paul is already here, and he hasn’t called to tell me.”

“Then how do you know he’s here?”

“Jason told me he already spoke to him. Also, I saw him at a jewelry shop early this morning.”

“A jewelry shop?” Mary clapped her hands. “Do you know what this means?”

“Should I?” Suzie narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe he’s lost interest?”

“No Suzie!” Mary laughed. “He’s being sneaky, he’s at a jewelry shop, come on, put two and two together.”

“I don’t follow.” Suzie sighed.

“He’s going to propose, Suzie!” Mary clapped again. “He was probably at the jewelry shop to buy you a ring.”

“What? That’s nonsense. We haven’t even been dating that long, and that’s ridiculous. We’re too old to get married.”

“Too old?” Mary shook her head. “There’s no age limit to love, darling.”

“Mary, stop it. That’s crazy. Why would he even think that’s a good idea?”

“Maybe because he loves you?” Mary searched her eyes. “Would

it really be so bad?"

"For me? Yes. I have no interest in getting married. What then? Would we live together?" She scrunched up her nose. "Could you imagine?"

"Uh yes. I think about living with Wes all the time."

"Oh, no you're not…"

"No, we're not. But I do think about it. I rather miss having someone to snuggle up to and wake up next to."

"I'm not much for sharing my room." Suzie shook her head. "No, no, that would be a disaster."

"Aw." Mary hugged her. "Well, maybe I'm wrong. You never know. If he does propose though, make sure you let him down easy, Suzie. A man's heart gets broken very easily, and once it is, it's hard to fix."

Suzie frowned. "We'd better get to the motel before we miss our chance to talk to Leanne."

"You're right." Mary sighed. "I'm sorry that I didn't make you feel better, Suzie."

"It's all right. I just hope that you're wrong. I think I'd rather find out he's dating someone else."

Mary held her gaze. "No you wouldn't, Suzie. That I don't believe for a second."

Suzie offered her a half smile and nodded. "You're right."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

As Suzie drove with Mary towards the motel she thought about what Mary had said. She sorted through her memories in an attempt to remember whether she had ever spoken to Paul about marriage. He seemed to be as content as she was with the way things were. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to have someone live with her, in her room. To take turns for the shower.

"Ugh, no thanks," Suzie said under her breath and shuddered. She pulled into the parking lot of the motel. Maurice stood outside near the front door of the office, but there was no sign of Leanne. Suzie and Mary got out of the car and walked towards Maurice. Maurice glared at Suzie as she approached.

"Where is she?" Suzie glanced at the row of doors that led to the motel rooms.

"As far as I know she's still in there. Room three. That's as much as I'm getting involved. Understand?"

"Perfectly." Suzie glanced over at Mary. Mary grimaced. The two walked towards room three. Suzie knocked on the door. After a moment, the door opened. Before them stood the person who was in the photograph that Louis had printed.

"Leanne Kay?" Suzie met her eyes. They were hooded with dark circles underneath.

"Yes. What is it?" She wiped at her eyes. "I'm not doing any press."

"We're not the press." Mary's voice was gentle as she spoke. "May we come inside?"

"Why?" Leanne narrowed her eyes. "What is this about?"

"It's about your mother, Priscilla."

"What about her?" Leanne stood straight up. Suzie and Mary exchanged a quick glance. "She's passed away."

Suzie and Mary relaxed slightly as they felt a sense of relief that they wouldn't have to be the ones to break the bad news to her.

"We're sorry for your loss," Mary said sympathetically.

"Thank you. I just don't know why it happened, now." Leanne wiped at her eyes. "She and I just fixed things."

"Fixed things, how?" Suzie raised an eyebrow.

"She finally saw things from my point of view. I took her to see the nests. I took her to Redhawk River."

Suzie's stomach lurched. Had Leanne just revealed where Priscilla was murdered?

"Did you and your mother have a disagreement while you were at the river?" Suzie asked.

"No. My mother and I fought at dinner, but after dinner I showed her the reality. I showed her the nests and how much damage would be done. You know she loves that bird she has. I guess I finally got through to her when she realized that she would be hurting birds. She was going to call off the deal. She promised me that she would."

"When was the last time that you saw your mother, Leanne?" Suzie asked.

"It was that night. It was the last time I saw her. But I called her driver to drop her off at the bed and breakfast where she was staying. She broke her heel, and I was afraid if she walked she might get hurt. So, I called her driver. I don't even know if she made it home."

Suzie's eyes narrowed. Conner hadn't mentioned anything about picking up Priscilla. She began to think that maybe Leanne was telling the truth. Suzie reached into her purse and pulled out Jason's card.

"Have you spoken to the police?" Suzie asked.

"No why?"

"You need to contact him right away," Suzie said as she handed the card to Leanne. "He's investigating the murder…"

"Murder?" Leanne gulped and her eyes widened. "She was murdered?"

"Yes, Leanne, I'm so sorry." Mary gave her a hug. "I know this is a lot to take in. But anything you can tell Jason might help."

"Okay. Okay." She nodded. "I'll call him right now." She went back into the motel room and retrieved her cell phone.

Mary tugged Suzie aside.

“We need to be careful what we say,” Mary said. “She looks so upset.”

“People can fake it. She certainly had motive to kill her mother. And means and opportunity,” Suzie said.

“Do you really think that she did it?”

“I think that there’s one good way to find out. I’m going to go to Redhawk River and get a sample of the water. If Summer can match it, then we will at least know where Priscilla was killed.”

“I’m going to stay with her until Jason gets here. I don’t think she should be alone.”

“That’s good. I’ll let you know what I find at the river. Call me if you need a lift.”

“I will but I’m sure I’ll be fine, I can walk.”

“Okay, I won’t be long.”

“Suzie, be careful.” Mary squeezed her hand.

“I will be.”

Suzie climbed into her car. Just as she was about to start it, her cell phone rang. Her heart stopped when she saw that it was Paul. For a moment she considered ignoring it. Before it could go to voicemail she grabbed it up.

“Hello?”

“Hi beautiful.”

She smiled, despite her concerns. She loved the way he greeted her. “Hi handsome.”

“I just got in, I heard about what happened. Are you doing okay?”

“I think so.”

“Can we meet for a bite?”

“I’m on my way to go for a hike.”

“A hike?”

“Yes, near Redhawk River.”

There was a long pause. Suzie bit into her bottom lip. She wondered what he was thinking.

“I’ve been looking forward to seeing you.”

“I’m sorry, Paul. We can meet up later.”

“Maybe I could join you for the hike?”

Suzie grimaced. She knew that he was lying to her about just getting in. Why would he do that unless he was hiding something?

“Of course you can. I would love that. But you’re not too tired?” Even though she suspected he was up to something she still wanted

to see him.

"I'm never too tired to spend time with you, Suzie."

"Aw. I'll be there in five minutes."

"That's what I call service."

Suzie laughed as she hung up the phone. Despite the stress of the murder, Paul always found a way to make her laugh. She changed direction and drove towards the dock. As she approached it she thought about how lucky she was to have found him. It was an unexpected relationship, but one that she was very happy with. She just hoped he wasn't going to do anything that would change that.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

When Suzie pulled up to the docks she noticed that there were not very many people milling about. Suzie thought about the resort taking over part of the coastline of Garber. It wasn't until that moment that she truly understood why everyone was so upset about the possibility. The quiet piece of paradise was all theirs for the time being, the moment that it became a resort town, it would no longer be a hidden gem for mainly the local residents to enjoy. She was lost in thought when Paul opened the passenger side door of the car. The sudden movement and sound caused every muscle in her body to jerk.

"Oh Suzie, I'm sorry if I startled you. I thought you saw me."

"It's okay." Suzie laughed. "I guess I was just distracted."

Paul leaned across the car to hug her. His familiar scent and warmth surrounded her. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, Paul." Suzie lingered in his arms for a moment, then she pulled away. "Was it a good trip?"

"It wasn't bad." He shrugged. "It could have been better. I'm sorry about what happened to Priscilla. It's hard to believe that someone could be so cruel."

"It's even harder to believe that it might have been her own daughter, Leanne that did it."

"Her daughter?" Paul gasped.

"That's why I'm going to the river. If I can prove that the water in Priscilla's lungs is the same water that runs in the river then I think Jason will be able to make an arrest."

"I can't say it surprises me that you're involved in all of this. Thanks for letting me tag along."

Suzie shot him a smile as she started the car. She drove towards the river based on the directions that the GPS provided. It took her

down several windy, tree-lined roads. When they arrived at a small dirt parking lot she stopped the car. Paul hopped out and walked around to meet her at the other side of the car. The two embraced again and shared a small kiss.

"I'm so glad to be home." He smiled as he looked into her eyes. Suzie smiled in return but broke the visual connection before it could linger.

"I just need to get a small sample of the water."

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Paul looked at the thick underbrush. "It doesn't look like anyone has been here for a long time."

"I know that Leanne and Priscilla were here together the night that Priscilla was killed. Leanne claims that her mother changed her mind about the development deal, but I find that hard to believe."

"Maybe she came to her senses." Paul pulled back some branches so that Suzie could step through. "I'd rather think that, than anything else."

"Me too. But the water will reveal the truth. Someone drowned Priscilla and then dumped her body in or near the ocean."

"If they drowned her here then why would that person move the body to another location?"

"In an attempt to make it look like an accident. I guess whoever did this thought that people would just assume, as the police first did, that it was an accidental drowning. Without an investigation into the death, they would have gotten away with it."

The foliage was dense around the edge of the river. Suzie held on to Paul's hand as they made their way through it.

"Do you really think this will help the investigation? It will be enough for Jason to make an arrest?"

"I don't think that it can hurt it. Summer said that if she had a sample to compare the water to then she might be able to pinpoint the crime scene. If the water matches then I think we can be fairly certain Leanne killed her mother. At the very least the crime scene investigators can search the area for any evidence."

Paul shoved his hands deep down into the pockets of his thick jeans and looked out over the area. Suzie pushed some reeds aside from the water's edge. She dipped the small container into the water and collected a sample. When she stood back up Paul grasped her arm to keep her steady.

"This should do it." Suzie sealed the vial then dropped it into

her purse.

"We're already out here we might as well enjoy a little stroll." Paul tipped his head towards a trail that led away from the river. Suzie eyed him for a moment. She had heard plenty of proposal stories over the years and most involved a beautiful setting, such as the woods they were in.

"Oh, I don't know. I really need to get this sample back to the lab."

"A few minutes?" He stroked the back of her hand. "I'd love just a little time alone with you." Suzie tried to think of any excuse to prevent a walk through the woods, but from the way Paul's eyes squinted, she knew he would see right through any ploy.

"Okay sure. A short one."

As they walked hand in hand along the trail Suzie glanced over at him. His expression was as casual as always. Nothing about it indicated that he kept a secret. But Suzie was certain that he was.

"How was the weather on the water?"

"It was nice. Not a single squall."

"I'm glad. You got back a bit late." Suzie left the opening there for him. She wanted him to admit that he docked earlier than he claimed.

"Hm." Paul shrugged. He paused beside a very large flowering tree. "Isn't this gorgeous?" Suzie looked up at the tree.

"Yes, it is quite beautiful." When she looked back at Paul he was down on one knee.

"Oh no, Paul. No!" Suzie stumbled back a step. Paul glanced over at her.

"What's wrong?"

"This isn't the right time and…"

"Huh?" He tugged the laces on his shoe and tied them tightly. "It's not the right time for what?" He stood up. Suzie flushed as she looked away from him.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what I was thinking."

"Hey, it's okay. You've been through a lot of stress lately." He locked his eyes to hers. "I'm a little worried about you. I know that your instincts are good and you can solve any problem, but maybe this one is a little too intense for you."

"No. I'm fine, really. I was just confused."

"Not about me I hope."

"No, not at all."

“Okay good.” He took her hand again.

Suzie smiled, but the heat in her cheeks did not fade. “I should really get this sample to Summer. I don’t want it to sit too long.”

“Okay. Let’s head back.” He slid his arm around her waist. Her skin prickled with a familiar warmth in reaction to his touch, but her rapid heart rate remained. “Suzie?” He met her eyes. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m just a little shaken up by all of this.” Suzie glanced away.

“I don’t believe that for a second.”

“What?” Suzie looked back at him.

“I’ve seen you shaken up, and this is not that. What’s going on?”

Suzie smiled a little. Paul did know her better than she expected. “I’m just a little uneasy I guess.”

“All right, if you don’t want to talk about it that’s fine. Have dinner with me tonight? On the boat?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Please.” He smiled.

“With all that’s going on it might not be a good idea.”

“All that’s going on is exactly the reason that you need a break. I’m sure that there’s one hour of the day that you can spare. Hmm?” His jaw set and his shoulders squared. Suzie was quite familiar with the stance he took. It declared that he was going to be stubborn.

“Yes.” Suzie leaned into his shoulder. “For you, definitely.”

“Great. Now let’s get that sample back to Summer. The sooner you get to the bottom of all of this the sooner this town can go back to normal.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12

Suzie dropped Paul off back at the dock before she continued on to the medical examiner's office. When she stepped inside she heard Summer's music playing.

"Hello?"

"Hold on, Suzie, I'll be right out." The music turned off. Summer walked out of the back room to greet her. "What's up?"

"I have a sample from Redhawk River. I think it's the area where Priscilla might have been killed." Suzie held out the vial.

"Oh wow, great! Thank you, Suzie." Summer took the vial. "I will get this tested right away. If it is a match then I'll obviously have to get a sample tested that was collected through the official channels, but we can start with this. We really need to find the crime scene. I think that will make all the difference in the case. I've never seen Jason so frustrated. He has plenty of suspects, but nothing solid to go on. So, hopefully this will help."

"I didn't realize this was getting to him so much."

"Something sure is. He's been jittery and distracted. I tried to get him to have lunch with me and he turned me down. I think it's the first time he ever has."

"Well, there's a lot of pressure around this case and a lot of attention. Jason's probably in a hurry to get it over with, just like we all are."

"To be honest with you, Suzie, I'm in no hurry. In my line of work a slow, steady pace and precision is key. If I make one mistake, it can mean that Priscilla never gets her justice. That's why I evaluate everything about the body."

"You do a very good job, Summer. Will you let me know when you get the results of the water test?"

"Absolutely. Thanks for going to so much trouble. What made

you think that the river might be the place?"

"I spoke with Priscilla's daughter, Leanne, and she said that she and her mother went out to the river together the night she died."

"I see." Summer frowned. "I'll let you know."

"Thanks." Suzie left the office and drove towards Dune House. When she parked she noticed that Wes' car was there as well. She walked into the lobby to find Wes and Mary cooing at the bird.

"What are you two doing?" Suzie tried not to laugh.

Mary grinned. "We're trying to get this bird to say anything other than pumpkin."

"Good luck." Suzie shook her head. "I haven't heard it say anything else since Priscilla's death."

"It's not unusual for a bird to parrot a word they hear frequently," Mary said. "Pumpkin is just a rather odd word for it to hear often enough to retain."

"That's true." Suzie laughed. "I think I've said it more since the bird has arrived than I have in a lifetime."

"Oh, by the way I ran into Jason in town and he had just finished questioning Leanne." Wes straightened up and turned to look at Suzie. "I thought that you might want to know what he found out from Leanne."

"Sure, what did he tell you?" Suzie asked.

"She told him the same thing she told you and Mary, that she and her mother had gone out to Redhawk River. But he pushed for more information. I guess she and her mother had been in contact quite a bit. He found proof of it in their phone records. Leanne and Priscilla spoke on a daily basis for at least a month before Priscilla arrived here," Wes explained.

"That's odd, isn't it? I thought they were estranged?" Suzie glanced towards Mary, who nodded.

"They were. I guess that Leanne admitted that she and her mother were not exactly talking. They were arguing," Wes said. "Each and every call Leanne attempted to get her mother to agree to back out of the deal. But Priscilla would insist that she already made a commitment to her business partner and there was no way for her to change her mind."

"That must have been quite frustrating for Leanne." Suzie narrowed her eyes. "All of that resentment must have built up."

"It also makes it seem impossible that Priscilla would suddenly change her mind about the deal. If after all of the arguing she still

resisted, then why would one walk through the woods change anything?"

"Exactly." Suzie sighed. "It looks like Leanne might just be the murderer. I took a sample of water from the river to Summer. Once she confirms that it matches the water in Priscilla's lungs then we'll be able to settle all of this."

"Jason tried to hold her with what he had, but he didn't have enough. He had to let her go." Wes sighed. "That's one of the worst parts of police work, knowing who the criminal is, and not being able to do anything about it."

"What if she takes off?" Suzie shook her head. "She has no reason not to run if she thinks that she is a suspect. How could they just let her walk out?"

"His hands are tied, Suzie. It's not Jason's fault," Wes said.

"Well, then we need to get some real evidence. There's no time to wait for the water report to come back."

"What do you mean, Suzie?" Mary studied her. Suzie met Mary's eyes and then glanced over at Wes.

"I think it's something that we need to discuss in private, Mary."

"Anything you can say to Mary in private I'm sure you can say in front of me." Wes folded his arms across his chest. "Unless of course you intend to get her into some kind of illegal activities. Is that the case?"

Suzie raised an eyebrow. "What happens between Mary and me stays between Mary and me."

"Is that so?" His laughter had an impatient edge.

"Yes, it is so." Mary placed a hand on Wes' shoulder. "There's a lot of things that Suzie and I can only tell each other. That's non-negotiable."

"So is Suzie putting you in any kind of danger!" Wes' eyes narrowed. "You have to be careful."

"I would never do anything to put Mary at risk, Wes. If you don't know that, then you and I need to spend a lot more time together."

"All right, all right." He held up his hands. "In my experience when the two of you get together some very interesting things happen."

"But we're both still here, right?" Mary smiled. "I appreciate your desire to protect me, Wes, but I've made it through many decades and the only person who has had my back through every

single moment of that time, is Suzie. We take care of each other. So, you may worry if you wish, but it will be a waste of your time."

"Please excuse me for attempting to get in the middle of something so sacred. You're right. I may have overstepped. I'm sorry, Suzie."

"Don't be." Suzie smiled. "Anyone who cares about Mary enough to want to ensure her safety, even from me, is someone I respect."

"That's gracious of you, Suzie." Wes winked at her. "I'll be on the porch if either of you need me."

Even with Wes out on the porch Suzie pulled Mary into the kitchen to talk. "Thanks for coming to my defense."

"Wes means well, he's just always in detective mode."

"His instincts aren't wrong. I do want to get you involved in something illegal and potentially dangerous."

"Well, why else would we need to talk in private?" Mary grinned. "What is it?"

"Neil managed to check out of his room before it was ever searched. I don't want the same thing to happen with Leanne. Jason can't go in without a warrant, but I think there has to be some kind of proof in there. I think we should break in."

"What if we are caught?" Mary frowned.

"We just have to make sure we aren't. I want the chance to see what Leanne might be hiding before it's too late."

"I think it's a good idea," Mary paused and peeked out of the kitchen. "We'll have to get rid of Wes first."

"We have to go soon because I have dinner with Paul tonight."

"Well, we can't have you miss that." Mary winked. "Let me send him on his way, then we can head out."

"Wait, we need to make sure that Leanne is not in her room, too." Suzie considered her options for a moment. "I know what to do. Go ahead and deal with Wes."

As soon as Mary left the kitchen, Suzie placed a call to Louis. "I know, I know, it's me again."

"I don't mind. What can I do for you, Suzie?"

"Is there any way that you could send an anonymous message to someone?"

"Several ways."

"I want to get Leanne out of her motel room. The only way I can be sure to do that is if there is a problem at Redhawk River."

"Oh, maybe a fire?"

“That would probably work, but I wouldn’t want to alarm anyone else or get the fire department involved.”

“Hm. Maybe something more personal then. I know. Why don’t I send her a message that there’s going to be a rally for the seabirds in town. By the time she figures out that it’s not happening you should have enough time to go through her room.”

“Perfect. Thanks Louis. Let’s hope it works.”

“No need to hope when I’m on the case, you can be certain.”

Suzie smiled at his confidence. She met Mary on the porch just as Wes pulled out of the parking lot.

“He wasn’t upset I hope?”

“No, he was fine. I told him we needed some girl time, and he had no problem with fleeing.” Mary laughed. “Sometimes I wonder what men think women do during girl time.”

“Well, apparently we stage break-ins and solve murders.” Suzie grinned. “Let’s head straight for the motel. Louis is setting some bait to draw Leanne out, but we won’t know if it worked until we get there.”

“This isn’t your way of avoiding dinner with Paul is it?”

“Not at all.” Suzie glanced at her watch. “We’d better hurry if we’re going to get back in plenty of time for me to gussy up for Paul.”

“Gussy up? Really?”

Suzie grinned.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

On the drive to the motel Suzie peppered Mary with the details of Louis' plan.

"That should work. But we don't know for how long. We will have to move as fast as possible," Mary said.

"Yes, and we have to watch out for Maurice, too." Mary started to pull into the parking lot of the motel, but Suzie gestured for her to keep driving. "Let's park in the next plaza. That way Maurice won't notice the car."

"Good idea." Mary parked the car. The two walked towards the motel behind the shops in the plaza and crossed onto the motel property behind the building. Suzie counted the windows to figure out which room belonged to Leanne. The parking lot was fairly empty. Perhaps the news of the murder had scared some people off, or the majority of Maurice's guests were out enjoying the day. Either way it worked to their benefit. Suzie noticed that Maurice's car appeared to be missing as well.

"I'm going to take a look in the window to see if she's in there."

"I'll walk around to the front and knock." Mary headed for the front of the building. Suzie peered through the back window of the motel room. The flimsy curtain did nothing to hide the interior of the room. From what she could tell Leanne was not in the room. She gave Mary some time to knock. There was no movement in the room.

Suzie tried to open the window. As she hoped it would be, it was unlocked. She eased the window open and hoisted one leg over. In her mind she lithely climbed into the room. In reality her foot caught on the corner of the curtain and she fell forward flat onto her stomach on the bed. As fast as she could she got to her feet. One quick glance around informed her that there was no one else in the

room with her. She grabbed the corner of the bedspread and looked under the bed. When she straightened up she heard a scuffle at the window. A sharp breath caught in her chest as she spun around to find Mary with one foot over the windowsill.

"Mary, what are you doing?"

"I'm trying to get in the window."

"No! Just stay out there and be a lookout."

"Oh, you get to have all of the fun." Mary huffed and crossed her arms. Suzie smiled and began picking her way through the small motel room. It was drab in comparison to the rooms she was used to at Dune House. She noticed Leanne's suitcase which stuck out of the closet. When she flipped it open all she found inside were a few t-shirts and pants. She poked her head in the bathroom and spotted a toothbrush and a small hairbrush. There was nothing so far to implicate Leanne in a crime. She discovered a well-read book left on the bed. Other than that there weren't many personal items. Then Suzie spotted it, a datebook on the bedside table. She picked it up and began to flip through it. Many of the pages were filled with contacts and appointments. However, in the notes section it appeared to be more like a diary. She began to read through some of it.

How I could have sprung from the womb of a woman so callous, so ignorant, is beyond me. I long for the day when I am able to make her face the consequences of all the damage that her power and money have caused.

Another entry was just as infuriated.

Once more the devil I call mother will destroy what I hold most dear. It's not enough that she abandoned me as a child in the pursuit of money, now she will make mother birds abandon their nests and eggs, all to ensure a little more profit. If there is ever anything I can do to stop her, I must do it. I can't be faint of heart. I can't be intimidated by her goon, Runkin. I must be brave enough to put a stop to all of this.

Suzie's heart skipped a beat. She knew that there was no way that she could give the datebook to Jason to use as evidence as she had broken in to see it. But there was no question in her mind that

Leanne hated Priscilla more than enough to harm her. However, there was one other thing that stood out to her in the notes, her hatred for Neil Runkin as well.

"Suzie? I heard a car pull into the parking lot."

"Okay, I'm done here anyway." Suzie made a smoother exit than entrance. Once on the other side she eased the window closed. Carefully they made their way back across the parking lot and into the next plaza. Suzie's heart still raced even when they reached their car.

"What did you find?" Mary fumbled with the keys to get the lock on the door open.

"I found something rather interesting. I'm going to put in a call to Louis and see if he can help me with something. I could do it myself, but I think Louis will be quicker and probably more successful. It seems that Leanne had a particular dislike for Priscilla's business partner, Neil. Her diary is full of hatred towards her mother as well. Several times she states that she will do anything to stop her mother from causing more harm to the environment."

"Wow, that certainly makes her feelings quite clear."

"I also don't think it's possible that the two made up as easily as Leanne claims. I'm going to make a quick call to Louis, and then I have to get back to Dune House and get ready for my dinner with Paul."

"Do you think tonight will be the night?" Mary winked at her.

"I hope not." Suzie sighed. "Do you think a man has ever stayed with a woman if she turned his proposal down?"

"You're really not interested, are you?"

"I love Paul." Suzie stared down at her own reflection in the screen of her phone. "I feel for him in ways that I've never felt for anyone. But that doesn't change the fact that I like things exactly as they are. I don't want to give up what we have right now."

"You wouldn't really have to give it up."

"Sure I would. Marriage would become a big priority for me. I love being with Paul, I just love having my own space as well. What we have works, why change it. Is love any less strong without a piece of paper?"

"I understand what you're saying, Suzie. To be honest with you, Paul might be a little hurt if you turn him down, but if he loves you the way I know he does, then he will get over it. It should matter to

him more that you are content with what you have, than any piece of paper. If that's not the case, well then he might not be the right person for you."

"I agree. But I hate to think that. I do enjoy his company. I care for him more than I ever expected to."

"Yes, it does take you by surprise." Mary shook her head. "After what happened with my ex, I never imagined I'd want to be close to anyone again. But now I can't imagine my life without Wes. It is quite strange how things can change so fast."

"You're right about that." Suzie nodded. "Let's go, you drive and I can make the call on our way." Once they were on the road Suzie dialed Louis' cell phone number.

"Hi Suzie."

"Hi Louis. Are you busy right now?"

"Not really. It's been a slow day."

"Would you mind checking into something for me?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"Can you see if you can find out if Leanne Kay and Neil Runkin had any run-ins, confrontations?"

"If someone took a picture of it or wrote an article about it, I might be able to find it. Give me an hour and I'll see what I can dig up."

"Thanks Louis, you're the best."

"Yes, yes I am." He laughed as he hung up the phone.

"Do you think he'll be able to find something?" Mary looked over at her.

"Yes, I hope so. In the meantime there's not much that the datebook can provide Jason with and I can't really let him know that I've seen it as then I'd have to explain that I broke in," Suzie said as they pulled into the parking lot of Dune House.

"That won't go down well."

Suzie went straight up to her room to get ready to meet Paul. She sorted through her clothes to find something to wear, but it was hard for her to concentrate. Finally, she decided on a blouse and jeans. She didn't want to look as if she was trying too hard, but she also didn't want to look too casual. Once she was dressed Suzie walked into the living room to find Mary curled up on the couch with a blanket and a book.

"No Wes tonight?"

"Not tonight." Mary held up her book. "I have a different kind of

date. Have fun tonight!"

"I will, I hope." Suzie grinned.

"Don't let what I said get to you, Suzie. You know Paul better than I do. If you two haven't even discussed the subject then I'm probably wrong about the proposal."

"That is a good point, Mary. Maybe I am worrying too much about it. Paul's not one to rush into things."

"See?" Mary smiled. "Now, just go and enjoy yourself."

"Thanks Mary. I will." She leaned down and gave her friend a warm hug.

When she drove away from Dune House she did her best to keep her mind focused on the moment rather than what might happen in the future.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

Suzie parked at the dock just as twilight thickened. The last of the evening light lingered on the glassy surface of the water. She paused to soak in the beauty for a moment. Everything about Garber was beautiful. She barely recalled her condo in the city anymore. She had adjusted very well to small town life. She walked along the dock to Paul's boat. When she stepped onto the deck the boat rocked just enough to make her grip the railing. The door to the interior of the boat swung open.

"There you are." Paul smiled. "I just started to wonder if you might be standing me up."

"Paul, I would never do that." Suzie placed a light kiss on his cheek.

"I hope not." He wrapped his arms around her and looked into her eyes. "Do you know how much I think of you when I'm out on the water?"

"How much?" Suzie grinned. A faint blush colored Paul's weathered cheeks.

"Let's just say you're officially a distraction."

"Oh dear, I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"It's a very, very, good thing." Paul smiled. "Come on in." Paul stepped back from the door. Suzie smiled at the candle that flickered on the small table in the middle of the living space. It wasn't a large area, but Paul made it work. "I wanted to put the table on the deck, but there's a chance of rain. I thought it would be better if we were inside tonight. I hope that you don't mind."

"This is perfect, Paul. Thank you so much, but you didn't have to go to all of this trouble. Cheeseburgers would have been just fine."

"Did you just mention cheeseburgers to a fisherman?" He raised

an eyebrow.

"Oops." Suzie grinned.

He led her further into the boat. Suzie had added a few touches to the interior to make it a bit more livable. Soft cushions lined the benches and Paul's bed had a brand new bedding set. "Of course it's fish." He gestured to the table.

"Lovely. I've been looking forward to dining on something you caught." As they sat down at the table Suzie watched him with a nervous smile. "I have to say this is a very nice bright spot in the middle of all the madness I've been dealing with."

"I imagine it might be hard for you to relax with everything on your mind." He poured two glasses of wine, then handed her one.

"Ah yes, thank you, this should help." She took a sip. "Delicious."

"It is, isn't it?" Paul said.

Suzie picked up her fork and began to eat some of the fish. "Oh wow, Paul, this is amazing."

"Is it?" He took a bite as well. "Yes, it is."

They sat in silence while they enjoyed their meal.

Suzie reached for her glass, but her hand moved a bit too fast. She knocked into the glass and splashed wine all over her white blouse. "Oh no! I'm such a klutz." She frowned. Paul jumped up and handed her a napkin.

"You're not a klutz. The boat might have rocked a bit. I'm so used to it that I don't even notice."

"Excuse me for just a moment, Paul. I want to see if I can rinse this a bit."

"There are some clean shirts in the drawer if you want to put something else on, Suzie. You can change in my room."

"Thank you." She ducked into the small bedroom and slid the door closed behind her. One look at the wine stain on her blouse made it clear that there was little hope for it. She sighed and opened one of the drawers in Paul's dresser. She reached in and pulled out one of Paul's t-shirts. When she did a black velvet box flipped out of the t-shirt. It landed in the drawer. The moment that Suzie saw it her heart stopped. It began to pound again only when she picked the box up. "It can't be. It's not what I think. It must be earrings or a necklace." She couldn't resist finding out for sure. Her hand trembled as she flipped open the lid. The diamond engagement ring stared up at her from the ivory cushion. Her hand

trembled.

"Suzie? You okay? Did you find something to wear?"

Suzie glanced up at the door. She swallowed hard and tossed the ring back into the drawer. "Yes, I'll be right there."

"Okay."

Suzie changed into the t-shirt and wrapped up her blouse. Mary's skills with stain removal might just save it. When she stepped back out into the living area Paul stood up from the table.

"Wow, I have to say, Suzie, you looked gorgeous when you walked in here, but I think I like you even better in my t-shirt."

"Ha." Suzie smiled. "It is comfortable, I'll give it that. I'm sorry about spilling the wine."

"No problem. Let's just enjoy our meal."

Suzie sat back down at the table across from him, but she couldn't bring herself to look him in the eye. She knew that there was no way to avoid the truth now. She saw the ring with her own eyes. Paul was going to propose. The only positive thing was that the ring was still in the drawer. Maybe he bought it and was just waiting for the right moment. Maybe if she dropped big enough hints he would get the idea that she was not interested.

"You know, Paul, I do miss you when you're away, but sometimes I think that we're luckier than most."

"Oh?" He looked across the table at her. "Why is that?"

"Well, they say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Yes, we have to spend time apart, but that makes us value our time together so much more."

"I guess that's true. But if it were up to me, I'd never leave your side."

Suzie took another bite of her food. She wondered if Paul was the one who made sense in the scenario. If he could feel that way about her, why couldn't she feel that way about him?

"I love your company, Paul. But do you ever feel like if you don't get a little time to yourself you'll lose your mind?"

"Suzie. I'm alone on a boat a lot of the time. I get plenty of time to myself." He squinted at her. "Is there something you're trying to tell me?"

"No, I just…" The shrill ring of her cell phone interrupted her. She was relieved by the distraction. "I'm sorry, Paul, I have to take this."

"In the middle of dinner?" He raised an eyebrow.

“I know, I’m sorry. It’s Louis. I asked him to look into some things for me earlier.”

“If it’s about the murder I understand. I’ll be here.” He smiled.

Suzie stood up and stepped out onto the deck of the boat. When she answered the phone Louis’ voice was impatient.

“I didn’t think that you were going to answer.”

“I’m sorry I was in the middle of dinner with Paul.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s okay. Did you find anything of interest?”

“Yes, I did. I think I did anyway. It looks like Leanne and Neil have quite a history. In fact Leanne’s been arrested a few times and at least two of her arrests were directly related to her encounters with him.”

“Really? What happened?”

“Leanne staged a protest over the encroachment of conservation land. She and her group made a human chain around the access point that the bulldozers needed to use. When Neil tried to convince them to move he and Leanne got involved in a shouting match that ended with her slapping him in the face.”

“Wow. Poor Neil.”

“Maybe. Another incident made it seem like Neil was the aggressor. Leanne and a few like-minded friends hosted a sit-in to protest the hiring of a professor that was involved with the destruction of a foreign forest to make room for more houses. This had nothing to do with Neil that I can tell, however he still showed up at the protest and baited her into another argument. From what I understand he tried to drag her out of the room.”

“Wait a minute. Why would he do that?”

“I’m not sure. The more I looked into the connection between the two the more it seemed rather paternal.”

“So, Neil was playing the role of father?”

“Maybe there was something more between Priscilla and Neil than they were letting on?”

“Maybe.” Suzie tapped the back of her phone. “It’s honestly hard to say. The way they interacted when I saw them together was not anything near romantic.”

“Maybe things went sour?”

“So, Neil decided to end it completely?” Suzie nodded slowly. “I guess that is a possibility. Or maybe Neil and Leanne worked together and killed her.”

“Oh, that’s a scandalous thought.”

“Yes, it is.” Suzie frowned. “Thanks for the information, Louis.”

“You’re welcome. I hope that it helps. Let me know if there’s anything else that I can do.”

“I will.” Suzie hung up the phone. She turned around to step back inside the boat, but found Paul in the doorway.

“I just put everything away, I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m sorry that I interrupted dinner, twice.”

He studied her for a long moment. Suzie shifted under his scrutiny. “Suzie, I don’t care how many times dinner gets interrupted. But it really gets under my skin that you’re not comfortable around me. I feel like ever since I got back you’ve been distant, or even worried. I know it’s not about the case. So, what’s going on? Did something else happen when I was out to sea?”

“No, nothing.” She frowned. The last thing she wanted to do was lie to Paul, but she also didn’t want to hurt his feelings. “I’m glad you’re back. My mind is just in too many different places.”

“If you say so.” He cupped her cheeks with the weathered skin of his palms. “I just want you to know that you can tell me anything, Suzie. You don’t need to hold anything back. I want us to be honest with each other, not because we have to be, but because we want to be.”

“I want that too, Paul.” Suzie searched his eyes. “I feel really lucky that we found each other.”

“Good. That’s all that matters to me.” He hugged her. “Now, your mind may be in a million places, but I know one thing that will clear it right up.”

“What’s that?” He took her hand and led her further out along the deck of the boat.

“Look up.” He squeezed her hand. Suzie lifted her eyes to the sky. As she gazed at the star filled expanse her shoulders relaxed. She eased into Paul’s arms. In that moment it struck her that she was exactly where she wanted to be, just as they were. She held on to him a little more tightly and hoped that nothing would ever change that.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15

On the drive home to Dune House Suzie thought about Leanne and Neil. Could they really have committed Priscilla's murder together? Could they be so ruthless?

Suzie stepped into Dune House to find Mary asleep on the couch. The luxury of not having any guests meant she could camp out in the living room. Despite her hesitation to live with Paul, she didn't regret sharing her space with Mary for a second. They understood each other in a way that only sisters could, even if they weren't blood related. Suzie tucked a blanket around Mary and set the book on the coffee table so that it wouldn't get bent.

Suzie walked down the hall to her room. She sat down on the edge of her bed and closed her eyes. She was relieved that Paul hadn't proposed yet, but after seeing that ring in his drawer she knew that it was only a matter of time. Maybe if she wasn't so distracted by the murder she would be able to think of a way to let him know that she had no interest in marriage. But she was mentally exhausted from the back and forth between suspects. She didn't think she was ever going to be able to communicate to Paul that she simply was not the marrying type.

Suzie sprawled out on her bed and hugged her pillow. She thought that maybe if the murder was solved her focus could return to Paul. Maybe if she made more of an effort to pay attention to him he wouldn't be so interested in changing what they had. She fell asleep with her heart heavy and her jaw tense. In the morning she woke to the shrill ring of her cell phone. Bleary-eyed she sat up in her bed and reached for it. She expected that it would be Paul, but when she answered it was Summer's gentle voice that greeted her.

"Morning Suzie. I'm sorry if I woke you."

“It’s fine.” Suzie glanced at the clock. She had slept quite a bit later than she usually did. “Did you get the test results?”

“Yes, I did. I’m afraid they weren’t a match, Suzie. Wherever Priscilla was killed it was not in Redhawk River.”

Suzie’s heart dropped. A big part of her had already decided that was where Priscilla was killed. It hadn’t really occurred to her that the test might not be a match. “That is surprising.”

“I know. I really expected it to be a match. The preliminary results from the water in her lungs have come in. They indicate it was most likely tap water that she drowned in. She could have been killed anywhere that there was enough room to immerse her head. Maybe a bathtub.”

“Wait a minute.” Suzie’s eyes widened. “Did you say bathtub?”

“Yes, I did. Why? Does that mean something to you?”

“It might. The night that Priscilla was killed the bathroom on her floor had puddles of water on it. Mary and I just assumed that someone forgot to bring a towel in there with them. Then we noticed that the towels from Priscilla’s room were missing, but we didn’t think much of it, because guests take towels all the time. Or we thought perhaps they were mixed in with another load of laundry. I never considered that it could have had anything to do with Priscilla’s death.”

“It just might, Suzie. It’s a place to start. I’ll call Jason and send him over to take a look.”

“Thanks.” Suzie hung up the phone with a sinking feeling. Had the crime scene really been right under their noses the entire time? It seemed impossible to her and yet the truth was they never figured out where the missing towels were. She didn’t think they were in any of Priscilla’s luggage. She shuddered at the thought that Priscilla could have actually been killed in the bathtub. How could that have happened and no one know about it? Was it Stewart after all? Had Leanne followed her mother back to Dune House? She dressed and headed to the kitchen to find Mary.

“Morning.” Mary smiled. “I’m glad you slept in.”

“Mary, I think we have a serious problem.” Suzie shook her head at the cup of coffee that Mary offered.

“What is it?”

“I think that Priscilla might have been killed here, in the bathroom.”

“What?” Mary dropped the cup of coffee she held. The mug

didn't break, but the coffee splashed all over the polished kitchen floor. "That's not possible."

Suzie grabbed a towel and began wiping up the mess. As she did she reminded Mary of the state they had found the bathroom in the night of Priscilla's death.

"That's terrible. I hope that's not the case." Mary frowned. Both were so engrossed in the conversation that they didn't even hear Jason enter the bed and breakfast. He was already in the kitchen when Suzie sensed another presence and glanced up to see him.

"Morning. What happened here?" Jason looked at the remainder of the coffee on the floor.

"My hand slipped." Mary frowned.

"Need any help?" Jason reached for another towel.

"It's okay, Jason, I have it." Suzie straightened up. "Did Summer tell you about the bathroom?"

"She did, but it seems pretty unlikely that Priscilla was killed here. Still, we should check it out. Do you think the bathtub was used since that night?"

"I can't be sure but I don't think so. The rooms have small bathrooms with showers and both of our guests checked out pretty soon after Priscilla was found."

"Let's take a look."

"I'll show you to it." Mary led Jason down the hall. Suzie finished cleaning up the coffee, then joined them. When she arrived Jason had a flashlight pointed down into the drain of the bathtub.

"There's something in here."

"What?" Suzie frowned. "We keep it very clean."

"No, it's something shiny, metal. Hang on." He pulled a small knife out of his pocket and flipped it open. With careful movements he loosened the grate over the drain. When he slid it out of the way the hole was just large enough for him to fit his folded hand into. He pulled something out of the drain and held it out into the light.

"What is that?"

"It looks like a charm." Mary peered at it closely. "Like someone would wear on a bracelet."

"Is it what I think it is?" Suzie squinted at it. "I think it's a bird."

"It must be Priscilla's," Mary said.

"Well, we don't know that, yet," Jason said as he fished a small plastic bag out of another pocket. He dropped the charm into the plastic bag and sealed it. "I'm going to take another look." He shone

the flashlight beam down into the drain. As he searched it, Suzie noticed something strange about the tiles on the wall. One of them was cracked.

"Jason, look at that. I know that wasn't like that before. We do a maintenance check of the bathrooms before every check-in, including the tiles."

Jason looked up at the tile. He snapped a picture of it with his camera. "If we assume that Priscilla was killed in the bathtub the killer still had to move her body. It wouldn't be easy to sneak a body out the front door, so it looks like the killer pulled the body out through this window," Jason said as he looked at the window. "It looks like the window has been pulled off the track."

"I noticed that the other day, I was going to ask Paul to fix it," Suzie said.

Jason leaned forward and peered through the window. "Yes, that's not much of a drop. I'm going to go take a look."

Suzie and Mary followed after him as he rounded the house to the space under the window. Suzie remained close to Jason. When she paused behind him he gestured for her to back up a few steps

"Here it is. Right here." He crouched down and peered at the soil beneath the window. "See?"

Suzie crouched down beside him and Mary peered over her shoulder. There were deep grooves in the soil. "What caused that?" Suzie frowned.

"They're drag marks. If Priscilla was killed in the bathtub then she was pulled out through the window and dragged across the ground."

"Can we just follow the trail?" Mary glanced around. "Maybe we can find more evidence."

"No, it ends at the path. There's nothing more to find here. But I can tell you, this is very likely where the murder took place. I'm sorry, Suzie, but I'm going to have to have the bathroom sealed off until a crime tech team can comb through it."

"I understand. Of course, anything that is needed for the case."

"Suzie, you should be prepared for something else." He looked between her and Mary. "If the murder took place here at Dune House, as it seems that it did then you can expect that you and Mary will be added to the list of suspects."

"That's ridiculous. We had no reason to kill one of our own guests." Suzie shook her head.

“Sure you did. You had the same reason that everyone else who lives in this town did. You didn’t want some large resort to take over Garber, so you decided to take matters into your own hands. Then there’s the fact that even if you didn’t commit the crime you might look compliant or involved, because it was done under your roof.”

“Jason, you can’t be serious.”

“I’m just telling you what you can expect. It’s not as if the rest of the town doesn’t feel the same about the development on the beach. However, if it is confirmed that Priscilla was killed at Dune House then the spotlight is going to be on you and Mary. The one good thing is that Stewart is already a good, solid suspect.”

“What about Leanne?” Suzie frowned.

“Possibly. But when I spoke with her she didn’t strike me as particularly strong.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if things happened the way we think they did then someone lowered Priscilla out of the window. She might have been a small woman, but it would still take a strong person to be able to do that.”

Suzie’s eyes suddenly widened. “What about the driver?’

“The driver?” Jason raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, Priscilla’s driver. I saw him at Cheney’s. He was meeting with Neil, which I thought was strange.”

“Hm.” Jason narrowed his eyes.

“And Leanne said that she sent Priscilla home with her driver.” Suzie groaned. “I forgot all about that.”

“Well, Leanne told me that as well and I did speak with Conner,” Jason said. “He confirmed that he drove Priscilla back to Dune House and dropped her off.”

“Maybe Leanne did that as a way to hide her own actions.” Suzie’s brows knitted together. “She thought she could deflect blame because it would appear that Conner was the last person to see Priscilla alive.”

“There’s still the issue of how Priscilla’s body got out the window.”

“What if Conner and Leanne worked together?” Mary spoke up with a soft voice. “What if they bonded over their dislike of Priscilla and made the plan?”

“Then why would Conner be talking to Neil?” Suzie sighed.

Jason folded his arms. “Maybe Conner tried to play both sides. He offered to help Leanne, and then told Neil what happened?”

“If that’s the case, why wouldn’t Neil be using that information to get Leanne arrested? Why would he keep it to himself?”

“Maybe he plans to use it for leverage. To keep Leanne out of his business. Maybe it has something to do with the real estate deal.” Mary shrugged.

“That’s a good thought, Mary. I bet it has something to do with that. What do you think, Jason?”

“I think I’m going to have another conversation with Conner. I’ll be sending over some crime scene techs, all right?”

“Okay.” Suzie nodded and gritted her teeth. She didn’t want to deal with police combing through the house, but she knew that she didn’t have a choice. It made her feel uneasy to think that something horrible happened to Priscilla under their roof, but the evidence was there.

Suzie and Mary spent the afternoon catering for the crime scene techs with coffee and snacks. By early evening they had finished their work. Suzie didn’t expect any more visitors for the day.

“Do you want to hit the hay early tonight, Suzie?”

Suzie was about to answer when she noticed a familiar face through the front window. When the front door opened Suzie held her breath. Seeing Leanne again was like seeing her for the first time, in a brand new light. She couldn’t help but think of Leanne murdering her mother. It broke her heart and horrified her at the same time. Maybe it didn’t happen at the river, but Suzie wasn’t convinced that Leanne wasn’t the one to take her mother’s life.

“Hi.” Leanne walked up to the front desk and looked from Mary to Suzie. “I’m here to pick up Benita.”

“Oh?” Suzie looked over at the bird in the cage. “Are you sure

that you're ready for her?"

"Yes. As much as my mother loved that bird, I know that she would want me to take care of her."

Mary frowned and met Suzie's eyes. Neither were completely comfortable with the idea of handing the bird over.

"Well, she has lots of food to go with her." Suzie picked up the cage.

"Don't worry about that, I've already bought my own supply. You were so kind to come see me after my mother's death. My mother was so impressed with both of you. I do hope that you plan to attend the funeral. Here is the information in case you do. It's a bit of a drive." She set down a small piece of paper. "It won't be anything extravagant, but I will do my best to honor her."

"You've had quite a change of heart." Suzie tilted her head to the side. "From what I understand you and your mother were barely speaking."

"We were. I am so grateful that we had the chance to reconnect. What's happened is horrible, and I plan to make sure that whoever committed this horrible act will pay for it. But I am so glad that we had the chance to finally see eye to eye. I think for a long time my mother thought that everything I did, I did out of pure spite. She didn't understand that I saw a need to protect the environment, that it was never about me being against her."

Suzie narrowed her eyes. From what she had read in Leanne's datebook she had a very different impression of Leanne's attitude towards her mother.

"So, in one evening you two were able to resolve all of that?" Suzie asked skeptically.

"Well, I think my mother was starting to appreciate family more as she got older. I guess maybe she was starting to change her perspective on a lot of things. I think she was more willing to listen to my opinion. Or maybe she realized that money really can't fix everything, sometimes damage is done and can't be repaired." Leanne frowned as she looked into Benita's cage. "My mother had a good spirit, it was just misguided at times."

"I'm very sorry for your loss, Leanne." Mary reached out and patted the back of her hand. "I'm sure it was a comfort to your mother to know that you two were able to reconnect."

"I hope so." Leanne blinked back tears. "I really do."

As Leanne carried the bird out through the door Mary sighed.

“Poor girl.”

“Maybe.” Suzie arched an eyebrow. “Or maybe not.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16

The next day Suzie, Mary, and Wes drove to the funeral.

“Paul and Jason are going to meet us there,” Mary said as she glanced at Wes.

“I heard that Jason took Conner in for questioning yesterday,” Wes said.

“The driver?” Mary asked.

“Yes, Conner was refusing to give any information at all. Jason called me to see if I could give him some ways to get him to talk,” Wes explained.

“I’m sure you were able to come up with something. You’re very persuasive.” Mary grinned. “I’d love to be a fly on the wall at one of your interrogations.”

“Not me.” Suzie laughed. “You’re intense enough when you’re not on duty.”

“Yes, you certainly have a serious side.” Mary smiled at Wes who was about to protest.

“Here it is.” Suzie pulled onto the gravel lot in front of a small church. As they stepped out of the car Suzie noticed there were quite a few other vehicles, and those vehicles were rather fancy. Mary slid one arm through Suzie’s and one arm through Wes’ and the three began to walk towards the church. When they stepped through the door they were greeted by soft music, faint floral scents, and the commotion of people having multiple conversations. The wooden pews were filled with people that could have been models or movie stars. It was clear that Priscilla had quite an elite circle of friends. Suzie studied each face that she saw. She didn’t want to forget a single detail. In her experience the truth could come out at funerals.

With the way they were struggling to solve the murder it would

be a very good thing if some new evidence surfaced. However, the prim and proper behavior of the people around her made her think that there was not much chance of that. They took their seats near the back of the church.

"I'm going to check for Jason and Paul." Wes turned back towards the door.

"We'll save your seats." Suzie made sure there was space for three more in the pew. After a few minutes the noise of conversation settled to a quiet buzz.

"They're starting." Mary patted Suzie's hand and tilted her head towards the minister at the front of the church.

"Okay." Suzie sat up straight in her chair. "Watch for anyone showing up after it starts, or stepping out in the middle." She glanced around in search of Paul, but didn't see him, Wes, or Jason.

"I'll take the left, you take the right."

"Good." Suzie scanned the chairs. She spotted Neil at the front of the room. He glared at Leanne who sat in a chair beside the minister. As the minister went through a rehearsed, but heartfelt speech, Suzie looked around again for Paul. She turned her attention back to the front of the room as Leanne stood up and the minister sat down.

"First, I want to thank all of you for coming. Some of you may not even know who I am. I'm Priscilla's daughter, Leanne. My mother and I haven't always seen eye to eye. Many of you know that. Despite all of the times I have claimed differently, she was an amazing mother. We wasted many years through lack of communication and misunderstanding each other. I will always regret that. But as a little girl she always made sure I had everything I needed. I still close my eyes and expect to hear her call me Pumpkin."

Suzie's eyes widened at the nickname. She looked over at Mary who nodded. It was the same word that Benita repeated over and over. Was it possible that the bird was attempting to name Priscilla's killer, the last person she saw? Suzie stared at Leanne as she continued the eulogy. All of her words were beautiful, touching, but Suzie didn't believe them. Suzie was starting to believe that Leanne had killed her own mother. The tension must have been visible in her expression because Mary reached out and touched her hand.

"Not here, Suzie. Not here."

Suzie nodded. She didn't even hear the rest of Leanne's eulogy as her head pounded with the revelation of the woman's nickname. She did however notice when Neil stood up from his seat and walked right down the middle of the aisle and out of the church. She watched the door shut behind him.

"What was that all about?" Mary whispered.

"I'm not sure." Suzie frowned. "But it certainly was rude."

As the ceremony came to an end, Suzie stood up.

"I want to find Jason, maybe he's with Paul and Wes. I want them to know about Leanne's nickname."

"I think they're over there." Mary pointed out a group of men gathered near the door. As Suzie approached them she noticed that Summer stood beside Jason.

"Jason, I need to speak to you."

"What is it?" Jason turned towards her.

"Somewhere a bit more private."

"All right. Excuse me for a second." He met Summer's eyes. "I'll be right back."

Suzie led him out through the front of the church. When she was sure they were isolated she turned to face him. "Did you hear Priscilla's nickname for Leanne?"

"Yes, I did. Pumpkin? That's a pretty common nickname isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. It's also what Priscilla's bird has been saying non-stop, ever since Priscilla was killed. Don't you think it's possible that the bird might be trying to tell us something?"

"I'm sorry? The bird? You think that a bird is telling us who the killer is?"

"I think it's possible. Priscilla loved that bird, and she took it wherever she could with her. It must have heard what she said and seen the people she spent time with."

"Suzie, it's still a bird. You can't be serious. It's not as if that can be evidence."

"Jason, you don't have to be so dismissive. I think it's possible that the bird witnessed something to do with the murder. Leanne is already a solid suspect, this just adds fuel to the fire. Don't you think?"

"I think that you're letting this case get way too deep into your head. Priscilla is dead, and yes Leanne may have been involved, but a bird that says Pumpkin is not going to sway any judge or jury. In

fact, if I even try to enter it in as potential evidence I'll be laughed right out of the police station."

"I see what you're saying." Suzie frowned. "I guess I am getting desperate. I just want to make sure there's enough evidence to keep Leanne here."

"Well, I plan to take her in for further questioning. Unfortunately, she is planning on leaving town later tonight so I need to do it as soon as the funeral is finished. I spoke to Conner again and he informed me of some very interesting facts about Leanne's history with her mother, including the several times he's witnessed the two engaged in screaming matches. He also said that when he picked up Priscilla she was visibly upset. He tried to find out what was wrong and she refused to talk about it. When he dropped her off, he offered to walk her in, and she refused."

"That's not unusual though, Conner told me that Priscilla never allowed him inside."

"Maybe. It doesn't sound to me like the two made up the way Leanne claimed."

Suzie nodded. "Leanne told me yesterday that her mother seemed to be appreciating family more in her old age and she seemed to be opening her mind a little."

"Or maybe Leanne is lying. I don't know. The way Conner described her was pretty ruthless," Jason said.

"And you don't think Conner was involved and could be lying?"

"He could be but I don't think so. Once I got him talking he actually seemed quite open about things. He said he was meeting with Neil because he had offered him work as his driver."

"You believe him?"

"It all adds up. At the moment Leanne is our best suspect."

"So, you have enough to arrest her?" Suzie asked.

"Not yet, I'm just going to question her further, but it might lead to an arrest. She was in town at the time of the murder. She was seen with the victim not long before her death. She has all kinds of motive."

"But what about Stewart? He saw Priscilla return to Dune House alone," Suzie said.

"Stewart isn't exactly a reliable witness. However, even if he did see her return alone, that doesn't mean that Leanne didn't meet her there. Also, I want to try and get a search warrant for Leanne's room to see if there is any evidence that she was involved." Suzie

was relieved to hear that because if Jason could search the room then he would probably get to see the entries in Leanne's datebook and he would have more evidence.

"Is there any evidence in Priscilla's phone records?"

"No. She didn't receive any calls that night. That's the frustrating part. Stewart looked like the perfect culprit because he was right there. The only problem is, there's no motive that we can find. He had nothing to gain from killing Priscilla. Even with his history of assault I find it hard to believe that he would kill Priscilla for fun."

"So, you're not going to question him?"

"Once we catch up with him we will. But I'm hoping to get enough information from Leanne to clear him entirely. I think this is one of the only murder cases where I've had so many good suspects. One of them did this, and I am determined to figure it out soon."

"You will!" Suzie said with confidence.

"I hope so." Jason frowned as he looked towards the church. Leanne exited alone with her gaze towards the ground. "Time to get to the bottom of all of this." He strode towards Leanne. Suzie followed right behind him. She wanted to see Leanne's reaction.

"Leanne Kay, I need to take you in for further questioning concerning the murder of Priscilla Kane."

"What?" Leanne looked from Jason to Suzie. "You think I had something to do with the murder. That's not true. You can't accuse me of something that isn't true. You can't."

Mary walked up beside Suzie. "What's going on?"

Suzie pulled her back slightly and shushed her.

"Ms. Kay, I am not accusing you of anything, I just want to get to the bottom of this. It would be best if you cooperate." Jason met her eyes. "I don't want to have to forcibly bring you in for questioning. I don't want to have to handcuff you here. If you come with me willingly, I won't have to."

"How can you do this to me? How could you think that I would kill my own mother?" Leanne looked into Suzie's eyes. "I wouldn't do that. You know that I wouldn't. You have to know."

Suzie glanced away from her. Jason led Leanne away. When they reached the patrol car Leanne turned back to look at Suzie again.

"The bird. She is still at the motel. Please, will you take care of

Benita? If anything happens to that bird I will have really failed my mother."

"We'll take care of her, Leanne." Mary offered her a sympathetic smile. "We'll make sure that she's safe."

"Let's go." Jason guided her into the car.

"Why did you say that we would take care of that bird?" Suzie looked over at her.

"Because we will. Someone needs to. Dune House could use a pet, even if it's not permanent." Mary frowned. "If Leanne didn't do this she'll be out to take her back. It's the least we can offer, Suzie."

"Do you really think we should be offering her anything?" Suzie crossed her arms. "She killed her own mother."

"Allegedly." Mary shook her head. Wes walked up to both of them. He put a hand on Mary's shoulder. "It's not the bird's fault."

"Are you okay?" Wes asked.

"I will be," Mary said.

"Suzie?" Wes looked at her.

"I'm okay." Suzie closed her eyes. "I just can't believe that a daughter could do that to her mother."

"It is a tragic case." Wes frowned as Paul walked over to them.

"Where have you been?" Suzie looked at Paul with surprise. "You missed the entire ceremony."

"I'm sorry. Wes and I were having a conversation with Jason."

"The three of you?" Mary looked at them both. "About what?"

"Uh, well, that's personal." Wes cleared his throat.

"Yes. It was boy talk." Paul winked at Suzie. Suzie's throat grew dry. Was Paul talking to them about the ring? She hoped that wasn't the case.

"Can we go home now?" Mary leaned her head against Wes' shoulder. "This day has worn me out, I think I need a little beach time."

"Anytime." He wrapped his arm around her waist. "Suzie, will you join us on the beach?"

"I don't think so." Suzie met Paul's eyes. "Something about this case has left me on edge. I think I just need some time to think it all through."

"I've seen it far too many times. When it comes to murder within the family there is never anything but sadness." Wes drew his lips into a tight line.

"I couldn't imagine either of my children ever being angry

enough at me to cause me harm." Mary sighed. "It breaks my heart to think that things were so horrible between Leanne and Priscilla."

"Love can make you do the strangest things." Suzie sighed.

"No, it can't, Suzie." Paul took her hand in his. "Love doesn't make you do that. Hate, resentment, anger, can all make you do that. But love never makes you do that."

"Maybe. But not everyone is cut out for love, or uh, marriage," Suzie said.

Mary cleared her throat. Paul narrowed his eyes. Wes let out a quiet whistle. "I guess we'd better get going," Wes said.

"Suzie, I have my car if you want to ride with me." Paul gave her hand a light squeeze. "We could get lunch, or take a walk."

"Oh no, thanks Paul. I think I just need a little time to myself." Paul held her gaze for a long moment.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. You don't mind do you?"

He studied her. "If that's what you want, I don't mind."

"Great." Suzie smiled. Despite Paul's flexible response she detected a hint of frustration in his voice. A twinge of guilt summoned a subtle ache in her heart, but it didn't make her change her mind. "Thanks Paul." She leaned close and kissed his cheek. As she walked back towards the car she could feel Paul's eyes trained on her back. Her stomach twisted with regret. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Paul. But she had no idea what she would say when he popped the question. She hoped that if she kept avoiding being alone with him she'd come up with the perfect response. Once they were in the car together with Wes, Mary glanced over at her.

"Are you okay, Suzie?"

"Sure." Suzie kept her eyes on the road.

"It just seems like maybe you're having a hard time with something."

"Mary, I'm fine."

"You don't seem fine. Does she seem fine to you, Wes?" Mary looked in the backseat at Wes.

"Uh, I, well." Wes frowned.

"I'm fine, really. I'm just nervous I guess."

"Nervous about what?" Mary asked.

"I found something on Paul's boat. An engagement ring. You were right, Mary, I think he's going to propose."

Wes coughed in the backseat.

“And you really don’t want that do you?” Mary frowned.

“No. Honestly, I’ve tried to get used to the idea, to open my mind to it, but it’s just not the right thing for me.”

“So, just tell him that, Suzie. Paul will understand.”

“Would you understand, Wes?” Suzie looked in the rearview mirror at him. Wes’ cheeks were red. He looked away from her.

“How I would react doesn’t matter. But Paul seems like the type of guy that respects honesty. I think the hardest thing for a man is to be lied to by someone he trusts. So, if you want my opinion, I agree with Mary, you should just tell him. I’m sure if you two talk it through things will clear right up.”

“Maybe.” Suzie bit into her bottom lip. She wasn’t prepared to get married, but she really wasn’t prepared to lose Paul.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17

When Suzie, Mary and Wes pulled up to Dune House there was a car in the parking lot that Suzie didn't recognize.

"I wonder who that is." Suzie parked the car and stepped out. As the three approached Dune House Suzie saw that the door was open. Her heart pounded. Had she left it open? She didn't think so.

"Mary, didn't we lock up when we left?"

"I'm not sure." Mary frowned.

"Let me go in first." Wes pushed past the two women and jogged up the steps and across the porch. Suzie and Mary hurried after him. When Wes stepped inside a man at the front desk turned around with a frown.

"Do you work here? I've been waiting here forever."

Suzie moved past Wes. The man was tall, thin, and carried a soft-sided briefcase. He didn't appear to be a threat, but Suzie knew better than to judge a person by looks.

"Excuse me, can anyone help me here?" He tapped his palm on the desk. "Does anyone even work here?"

"I'm sorry I'll be right there." Suzie left Mary and Wes and walked up to the front desk. "I apologize, we weren't expecting another guest."

"I'm not a guest. I'm here on behalf of Priscilla Kane's estate. I'm her real estate lawyer. I need to get the paperwork that was in her possession."

"I'm sure you're aware of what happened to Priscilla?" Suzie said.

"I am. It's quite unfortunate. But the deal stands. I was awaiting the fax of the final signed paperwork. Since she obviously can't fax it now I need to get the paperwork from her room."

"What about her daughter?" Suzie frowned. "Shouldn't she be

the one to handle all of this?"

"Absolutely not. She would never agree to the deal. As long as the paperwork is signed the deal stands. Now, please let me retrieve it from the room."

"The police should have all the paperwork," Suzie said.

"Well, they don't have this particular piece, so it must still be in her room. So, you must let me get it," he said with authority.

Suzie glanced over at Mary and Wes. She knew that the locals would be infuriated if the deal stood despite Priscilla's death. She felt uneasy as she looked up at the man before her.

"I'll need some proof of identity."

"Sure." He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and withdrew his driver's license. "There you are. Now?"

"I'll just need to make a copy." She carried the license with her as she walked over to Wes and Mary. "It looks like there's been a wrinkle. This man, Tyler Grants is here to pick up the paperwork to finalize the deal."

"But how can he do that if Priscilla is dead?" Mary's eyes widened.

"As long as the paperwork is signed then the deal stands." Suzie shook her head.

"The police should have it in evidence," Wes said.

"Apparently, they don't," Suzie said. "I'm trying to stall him, but there's nothing that I can do about it."

"We could get to the paperwork first and hide it, or burn it even," Mary suggested.

"No." Wes put his hand on Mary's shoulder. "You can't do that, Mary. If you do you, Suzie, and Dune House could be sued. It's not something you should risk."

"Then what? Garber is going to be destroyed after all?" Mary asked.

"I doubt it's in the room if the police didn't find it. Even if it is maybe she didn't sign the paperwork." Wes shrugged. "Maybe Leanne was telling the truth and she had a change of heart."

"Maybe. But I doubt it. Priscilla was quite confident in her decision the last time I spoke with her. I'm sure the paperwork was ready to go. That is even more reason why Leanne would have taken drastic action to protect the seabirds," Suzie said. "Maybe Priscilla told her that the deal was done and Leanne thought the only option was to kill her mother."

“Then she obviously didn’t know that it wouldn’t matter.” Mary frowned. “All right. I’ll show him to the room. Wes, will you accompany me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I’m going to go to the motel and get Benita,” Suzie said. “I’m sure that no one has tended to her, and since you’ve decided she’s our new, or at least temporary, mascot, we’re going to want her to be healthy.”

“Thanks Suzie.” Mary smiled. Suzie grabbed her purse and headed for the door.

As she walked to the car she thought about the shock in Leanne’s eyes when she had found out that her mother had been murdered. It bothered her. It wasn’t something that could be easily faked. But if her reaction had been genuine then could that mean that Leanne was innocent?

The entire drive to the motel Suzie thought through what she knew about the murder. Leanne had motive to murder her mother. She expressed her hatred openly. On the night of her death, Leanne was with her for a considerable amount of time. When Priscilla left the restaurant she looked drunk, but maybe that was because Leanne drugged her or maybe simply because of her broken heel. The one piece of the puzzle that didn’t fit was how Leanne got her mother’s body out of Dune House. Suzie parked the car in front of Leanne’s room, but when she got out, she headed straight for the office. She gave the bell on the front desk two sharp swats. The tinny sound summoned Maurice from the back room.

“You again. Come to accuse me of yet another murder?”

“No, not at all. I’m here to collect Benita. I need the key to Leanne’s room, please.”

“You have a warrant?” Maurice sucked his teeth.

“Maurice, I really don’t have time for this. I need to get to the bird before it croaks.”

“All right. I don’t want to have to deal with that.” He snatched a key from behind the desk and handed it over. “I know what’s in there, so no stealing.”

“What’s in there?” Suzie clutched the key tightly in her hand.

“Towels, soap.” He shrugged.

“Oh, okay. I’ll try to restrain myself.” Suzie smirked and shook her head as she walked away. When she returned to Leanne’s room she slid the key into the lock. It was a lot easier than climbing in

through the window that was for sure. She turned the knob and stepped inside. She left the door open so that it would be easy to carry the cage back through the door. As soon as she walked in Benita began to chirp.

"Pumpkin!"

"Yes, I know, Pumpkin's with the police." Suzie peered through the bars of the cage at the bird. "Let's get you home." She started to pick up the cage, but noticed that the bird's water bottle was empty. She opened the door of the cage and pulled out the water bottle. As she did her cell phone rang. She paused and pulled her phone out of her pocket. She saw that it was Mary calling.

"Hello?"

"Suzie, I know you're getting Benita, but I wanted to let you know what we found."

"What is it?"

"The paperwork Priscilla was supposed to fax to her lawyer was found in evidence. Jason managed to locate it. After the lawyer couldn't find it in her room he called the police again. It was tucked away in a special section of her laptop case that the police didn't notice so they didn't find it originally. But the lawyer was determined it had to be somewhere. After the lawyer told Jason about the compartment he found it. All of the documents she signed were crossed out."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the paperwork was ready to go to finalize the deal, but Priscilla crossed it all out making it invalid."

"Are you sure it was Priscilla?"

"She left her initials on each page. It's possible they were faked, but if they were, why would Leanne make the paperwork so difficult to find?"

"So, you think Leanne was telling the truth about her mother having a change of heart?"

"It sure seems that way. If Leanne was able to convince her mother to change her mind, then why would she kill her mother?"

"That wouldn't make any sense at all. I think you might be right," Suzie said. "Maybe she had nothing to do with her mother's death after all."

"Maybe. Are you headed back to Dune House?"

"Not just yet. I am refilling Benita's water and then I'll be on my way. Poor Leanne. If this is true she's been arrested in error."

“I know. Hopefully Jason will think this is enough to release her.”

“If it’s not Leanne then Jason will have to look at the other suspects.”

“I think we need to look more closely at one person.”

“Who?” Mary didn’t answer. “Mary?” When Mary didn’t respond Suzie looked at her phone. She saw that the call had dropped. With a sigh she set down her phone on the table beside the birdcage. She was better off getting back to Dune House and discussing things with Mary there. She walked over to the sink to fill the water bottle. When she turned on the water Benita began to shriek.

“Relax Benita, I’m getting it right now.” Suzie shook her head. “I don’t think I’m a bird person.”

Her mind returned to the information that Mary had just given her. If the killer wasn’t Leanne, then who was it? Who would lose the most if the resort didn’t go ahead?

When Suzie turned back towards the cage a shadow fell across the room. It drew her attention to the window. For an instant she froze as a sensation coursed through her of being watched. The water bottle fell onto the floor. Benita shrieked even louder. Suzie was sure that she saw someone duck away from the window. Were they looking for Leanne or had she been followed by the real killer? She hurried out of the motel room to try to catch whoever peeked in the window. Maybe if she did she could find the final piece of the puzzle and save Jason the headache. Who had something against Priscilla? The driver?

Suzie walked around the side of the motel and noticed a car parked beside and partially behind the dumpster. It looked like someone had gone to a lot of trouble to try to hide the vehicle. As Suzie stepped closer she recognized the car right away. It was the same car that Neil Runkin drove up to Dune House in. She thought he had left town days ago so what was his car doing at the motel? Suzie glanced around to see if anyone might be nearby. When she saw that no one was around she stepped closer to the car. She wanted to be sure that she was not mistaken. The car looked just like the one that Neil drove, but it could have been a different one.

As she walked around behind the car to check the license plate she noticed something strange. The corner of a thick, white towel stuck out of the trunk. It partially blocked the license plate. Suzie picked up the corner of the towel to see the full plate. When she did

she brushed her fingers over the tag which had the letters DH embroidered on it. Suzie froze. That stood for Dune House. Why would Neil have one of the towels from Dune House in his trunk? Her heart began to race as she remembered all of the missing towels and the trail of water out of the bathroom.

As her mind began to piece together what might have happened to Priscilla she grew dizzy. She stumbled back from the trunk and right into the chest of someone who stood behind her. She let out a shriek as she spun around to face the person. Neil scowled at her as he grabbed her hard by the neck with one hand. “You just had to snoop didn’t you?”

Suzie struggled against him. She heard the subtle beep of a key fob being pressed then the click of the trunk popping open. Before she could take a breath the hard edge of the open trunk struck the back of her knees. In that moment she realized she was in real trouble.

She tried to get her bearings enough to fight her way out of the trunk, but Neil swung her legs over the edge and shoved her down on top of a pile of towels. Without a single word of explanation he slammed the trunk shut.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 18

Darkness filled every corner of the small space. Suzie didn't dare to take a breath as she waited for what felt like hours, but was just a few minutes. Only when she heard the engine start up did she begin to scream. Through the thick metal of the car she was certain that no one could hear her shrieks for help. After some time she stopped in order to conserve her energy. There was no chance of rescue, she had to focus on how to escape. Suzie tried to see in the dark trunk, but it was a struggle.

The damp towels created a musty scent that made it hard for her to breathe. She could feel the movement of the car as Neil drove along. How could she have missed the fact that Neil was the one who killed Priscilla? He had the most to lose from her changing her mind. Without Priscilla's support the deal would never go through. The only question on her mind was whether Leanne was in on it as well. Had Neil and Leanne forged some kind of alliance in an attempt to end Priscilla's life? Her muscles felt every bump and curve in the road. Her jaw clenched with fear.

Suzie tried to work out where Neil might be headed. Would she end up at the beach, tossed into the water as Priscilla had been? Would her body be found in a few days with no explanation of what had happened to her?

Suzie squeezed her eyes shut and balled her hands into fists as she mustered all her energy to remain strong. She had to figure a way out of the predicament she had landed herself in. She shifted in the trunk so that her feet would be available to thrust upward into a kick. The only opportunity for escape that she would likely have was the moment that Neil opened the trunk. When the car finally came to a stop Suzie held her breath. What would Neil do with her? Her heart raced. She thought of Mary and what might happen to

her once she was gone. Sure, she would manage, but it wouldn't be the same. Suzie knew she only had a few minutes to think of something to do.

She grabbed what towels she could find and balled them up together. The more she balled them up the heavier the damp towels became. She heard the door of the car creak open. Then footsteps as they rounded the car. Suzie clutched the ball of towels tightly in her hands. When Neil popped the trunk she waited for him to lean in. When he did she slammed the towels right into his face. Neil stumbled back with surprise. She swung her legs over the side of the trunk and jumped out. Right away she was hit with the scent of the sea. She was near the ocean, near enough to hear the crash of the waves.

Suzie wanted more than anything to flee, but she had no idea in which direction to go in. The car was parked in an empty parking lot of what looked like an abandoned building. She could run towards the street or she could run towards the ocean. If she ran towards the street she had no idea what she would run into. If she ran towards the ocean she presumed that it would eventually lead her back to Dune House. She decided to take her chances in the sand. As she ran she heard Neil shout from behind her.

"You're not going to get away from me! Get back here!" Suzie ignored his warning and ran as fast as she could. As soon as she reached the sand she realized her mistake. The beach was deserted. There wasn't a tourist or a local in sight. She had no idea where Neil had driven her, but it was nowhere near Dune House. With her decision already made she had no choice but to keep going. Her feet sank deep into the thick sand. Within moments she left her shoes behind.

Neil's heavy breath was only a few steps behind her. She had no idea if he would get tired before her. As hard as her heart pounded she wasn't sure how much longer she would be able to run. In the distance she saw a beach umbrella. It was bright yellow and blue. She used it as her focus as she ran as hard and as fast as she could. One slip in the sand and Neil would be upon her. Then there would be no escape. The beach umbrella glimmered in the sunlight. When she was close enough that she thought someone might hear, she risked the breath in her lungs by screaming.

"Help! Please help me!"

She reached the beach umbrella, but the chair beneath it was

empty. There was no house to run to, no resort or even a restaurant. It was just a beach umbrella in the middle of an isolated beach that someone might have abandoned long ago. Winded, Suzie tried to run again, but her legs trembled too hard to carry her. She collapsed into the sand. A spray of sand struck the back of her head as Neil skidded to a stop right behind her. She knew then, that she was not going to escape. She might have even made Neil's life easier by wearing herself out.

"Thanks for the work out." Neil chuckled. "I needed that." He reached down and grabbed her under the arms. Suzie made a mild attempt to wriggle free of his grip. She became aware that he didn't seem the least bit concerned about being seen. That meant that he already knew there was no one around to see him. Suzie closed her eyes and waited for her body to be tossed into the water. Instead Neil pulled her back towards the building.

"Let me go, Neil. Let me go." Suzie looked up at him as he tugged her right through the door of the building. "Please. I won't tell anyone. I won't say a word. Just let me go."

"I'm sorry, I can't do that." He scowled at her. "It's not as if I forced you to get involved in all of this. This is not my fault."

"Please, Neil." He tossed her down on the concrete floor. Suzie struggled to pull herself up to her feet. She was exhausted. Neil grabbed her arm firmly.

"Look, this isn't personal. My life is simple. It's all about numbers and profit. I can't let anything get in my way. I lost a lot of money on this property and I have some very dangerous people upset with me. I need this deal to go through. I have a lot riding on it. You are going to be a casualty to a great development for Garber, if that gives you any peace."

"Just let me go, Neil. If I figured this out, then others will, too. Do you want two murders hanging over your head?"

"Eh, what's one more?" He pushed her towards the wall of the empty building. "By the time they find you everyone will have forgotten about Priscilla. No one will put two and two together."

Suzie's heart lurched. Was he right? Just as he pulled the door closed behind him, Suzie heard something in the distance. She drew a sharp breath at the sound. Was it possible or was it just her imagination? The thought was swept from her mind as Neil approached her.

"I have to make a phone call. Your presence interrupted a very

important meeting. Once that's settled, I'll take care of you." He turned away from her as he pulled out his cell phone. Suzie looked around for anything that she could strike him with. There was nothing but dust and sand on the floor. On one wall a large poster was worn and weathered. It depicted what appeared to be a large resort.

It struck her that Neil was holding her captive in the remains of a failed beach resort. No wonder there was no one around. He probably owned everything she could see. Maybe, just maybe, if someone noticed she was missing and figured out by some miracle that Neil took her, they would think to look for her there. But by the time all of that happened, she was sure it would be far too late for her. She heard snippets of Neil's conversation about the development deal. It took a callous man to settle business matters while his future murder victim waited for his attention.

Suzie summoned all of her strength and started to stumble towards an open window. It was a bit too high for her to just climb through, but she had to try. As her feet shuffled along the concrete she noticed that Neil's voice no longer filtered through the air. Her heart sank as she realized that he had hung up the phone. Her futile attempt to reach the window ended before she even made it a few steps. He pinned her back against the wall. However, as she was shoved she heard the sound again. She was certain that the chirp was familiar. "Pumpkin! Pumpkin!"

Neil scowled and looked towards the window. "That damn bird!" His grip tightened on one of her arms. He clamped his other hand over her mouth. "Don't make a sound, understand?" When he met her eyes Suzie nodded. She knew that he was distracted by the bird, she could only hope that would give her an advantage. The bird landed on the windowsill of the open window. When Suzie saw her she wondered if it was all an illusion. But Neil's tightened grasp told her that he saw the bird, too.

"Pumpkin! Pumpkin!" The bird shrieked. All at once Suzie knew that the bird wasn't saying pumpkin at all. Benita was saying Runkin. Since pumpkin was more common that was just what people heard. The entire time the bird knew who the killer was. If only Suzie had paid attention she might have been more cautious around Neil's car. But she knew better than that. Nothing would have stopped her from investigating.

"I'm going to get rid of that bird once and for all." He kept one

hand clamped over Suzie's mouth and used his other hand to draw his gun. He pointed it towards the bird on the windowsill.

"No!" Suzie cried out against his palm. With her hands free she grabbed at the hand that held the weapon. Neil's hand dipped in reaction to the pressure. An explosion filled the air. It rocked Suzie's senses to the point of stopping her heart and stealing her breath. She squeezed his wrist hard to try to get the weapon to drop, but he easily pushed her back against the wall. When he did she caught sight of the bullet hole in the baseboard beneath the window. Benita was gone, but not likely harmed. However, without the bird to focus on, Neil turned the gun back on Suzie.

"You shouldn't have done that. I'm getting tired of this fight with you. I think I'm just going to put an end to all of this right this second."

"No Neil, don't. This isn't the way to solve things. It wasn't the way to deal with Priscilla either. You know that. You just didn't take the time to think it through. You let your emotions get the better of you."

"Keep quiet! You have no idea what you're talking about! Priscilla let that stupid girl get into her head! That wasn't my fault either."

"You took a mother from her daughter, you…"

Neil scowled at her with such intensity that Suzie winced. "You have no idea what I have endured for both of those women. When Leanne was a girl I tried. She was a wayward, strong-willed kid with no father to guide her. I stepped up as a father figure for her. I taught her everything I knew about business. I gave her an education that was priceless. Did she thank me? No. Of course not. She used everything I taught her to try to take me down in the public eye. What kind of ruthless person does that?"

Suzie just looked at him without responding. If he was talking then at least he wasn't pulling the trigger.

"Then Priscilla, my sweet, stupid Priscilla, she got caught up in her daughter's psychosis. For years I managed to keep the two of them apart, but in the end Leanne managed to creep inside of Priscilla's head. That's when I knew that I had no choice but to end it. Priscilla came to me and said she wanted out of the deal, the deal that was going to make us both millionaires, the deal that I've been working towards my entire life. How could I ever let that happen? I mixed her a drink. I spiked it, then I took care of things.

She never felt a thing. She never knew what happened. I was merciful."

"There is nothing merciful about murder!" Suzie met his eyes with fury in her own. "You're a selfish, terrible person, Neil, and no amount of justification is going to change that."

"I'm okay with being who I am." He shrugged. "I don't have a choice in the matter. It's my nature. This building we're in now was supposed to be my ticket to success. It was going to be the jewel of the coast. Instead, the deal was stopped because of an issue with turtles. Can you believe it? Rats in shells cost me every penny of my investment. It took years of small buys to build my fortune again. Then I turned around and sank it into this deal. I will not let anything stop it from going through. Not Priscilla, not you, and not Leanne if she gets it in her head to try to stop me. I will go and pick off every one of those seabirds myself if I need to."

"It's crazy that you can feel this way, Neil. These people were like your family, and this is how you treated them? It's disgusting. You have to see that none of this can be right. You're sick, and you need help, Neil."

"It's all over for you now. Money is power, and I don't need family if I'm successful. You consider that woman you live with to be your family don't you? How about that fisherman you date? And your long lost cousin, a police officer no less? But who showed up to save you? Just some belligerent bird. That's how far family gets you, Suzie. I'm doing you a favor by ending things for you before you're forced to learn that lesson."

He raised the gun and pointed it towards her face. Suzie flinched and turned away but she knew there was no real way to avoid the bullet.

An explosion filled the air. Suzie's entire body jolted. She felt a heavy weight against her chest. It didn't hurt as much as she thought it would. She braced herself for her final breath. But she didn't feel any pain, or have any difficulty breathing. In fact her heart pounded so hard that she was sure it was getting stronger.

"Suzie? Suzie!"

She knew that voice, it was Jason. She opened her eyes. Benita perched on the windowsill right in front of her. Suzie realized that the heaviness against her chest was Neil's weight slumped against her. The gun in his hand clattered to the cement floor.

"Jason?" Suzie cleared her throat. She was shocked that she

could speak.

"Hold on." Jason tugged at Neil until he crumpled to the ground. Suzie could see that he'd been shot in the shoulder. His eyes were closed, but his face crinkled in pain. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Jason looked her over from head to toe. "I have the medics on their way in."

"I'm okay, Jason. I think I'm okay." She looked up at him with wide eyes. "You saved me."

Behind Jason, Kirk rushed in followed by a few uniformed officers. Jason looked into her eyes.

"Suzie. I'm sorry it took me so long to get here." Without awaiting a response Jason put his arms around her and held her close. Only then did Suzie realize that tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I'm so glad you came." She hugged him in return with her arms so tight around him that she wondered if he could breathe.

"Let's get you outside." Jason guided her past the paramedics that tended to Neil. Kirk retrieved Neil's gun, then stood watch over him. The sunlight greeted Suzie as she stepped outside. There, in the parking lot, strenuously restrained by two officers was Mary. She pushed past the officers and rushed towards her.

"I know you told me to wait here, Jason, but I heard the gun shot, and I…" Mary hugged Suzie. "Are you okay? Please tell me that you're not hurt."

"I'm not hurt," Suzie said.

"I will kill him!" Mary exclaimed. "I will kill him with my bare hands, Jason, you might need to put me in handcuffs."

"Oh Mary." Suzie smiled through tear-filled eyes. "You're not going to kill anyone."

"You don't know that. I might. I sure want to." Mary pursed her lips. "I got a call from Maurice. He said you let the bird loose and it was shrieking about pumpkins. I knew you would never do that so I tried to call your cell phone. When you didn't answer I knew something was wrong. Wes and I drove to the motel. We found your purse, your phone, and an open birdcage. Benita was shrieking just like Maurice said she was. Wes threatened Maurice for information, but Maurice insisted he only gave you the key and hadn't seen you since. Benita kept flying around the dumpster. Wes noticed an oil stain on the ground. He saw the same oil stain at Dune House and put two and two together and we presumed that it was probably

from Neil's car. Since it was fresh, we thought perhaps he saw what happened or was involved. After the paperwork we found, Neil was already our best suspect."

"And then Benita led you all the way here?" Suzie's eyes widened.

"No, not exactly." Mary smiled. "Jason ordered a 'be on the lookout' for Neil's vehicle to be sent out to all patrol cars. Since Neil's car is pretty noticeable it didn't take long to track it down. Wes has a police radio so we came here straight away. I did let Benita out of her cage when we got here hoping that she might distract Neil. I had no idea that she would land on the windowsill like that."

"If she hadn't I might not have made it out of there. Neil admitted that he killed Priscilla and Leanne had nothing to do with it."

"We heard." Wes nodded as he walked up to them. "Everything is going to be fine. Once Neil is treated he'll be headed to prison, and that will be the last time he can hurt anyone."

"What about the real estate deal?" Suzie frowned.

"It won't go ahead. The paperwork was never sent and because Priscilla crossed out everything it can't be used. It's clear that she intended to cancel the deal before she was killed," Wes said as he folded his hands behind his back. "It's all settled. The important thing is that you are safe."

"Yes." Mary met her eyes. "Absolutely."

Paul's car screeched into the parking lot. Suzie looked up and felt her heart leap at the sight of him. It didn't matter to her that he might want to marry her, or that he had a ring hidden on his boat. All that mattered was that he was there. Suzie opened her arms to him. He pulled her close and held her against his chest until her trembling eased.

"I love you, Suzie."

"I love you too, Paul." She felt his muscles relax in response to her words. She tightened her arms around him. Maybe Paul had different ideas of where love should lead, but she was glad that he wanted to share that love with her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19

After all the reports had been filed and medical evaluations completed, Suzie returned to Dune House with Mary and Paul at her side.

“I am exhausted.” Mary yawned as soon as they walked in the door. “Do you want something to eat, Suzie? Some tea?”

“No Mary, the only thing I want is for you to rest.” She hugged her friend. “Please?”

“All right, I won’t argue.” Mary smiled. “But no wandering off, okay?”

“I promise,” Suzie said. As Mary walked down the hall to her room Paul rubbed Suzie’s shoulders.

“I’m guessing you need to rest, too.”

“Actually, I’m wired. I don’t think I could sit still if I tried.”

“Oh, good.” Paul smiled and looked into her eyes. “Then how about a walk on the beach?”

Suzie started to nod in agreement, then she remembered the ring. “Oh uh, maybe in a little while. I think I see Jason pulling up.” She hurried away from Paul and out onto the porch. Jason’s patrol car parked. He stepped out, followed by Summer.

“Is something wrong, Jason?” Suzie frowned. Paul wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“No, nothing is wrong.”

“I insisted on making sure that you were okay.” Summer searched Suzie for any visible injuries. “I needed to see for myself.”

“I’m okay.” Suzie laughed. “I still have all of my pieces and parts.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” Summer sighed.

Paul nodded to Jason. “It’s a beautiful day isn’t it, Jason?”

“Yes.” Jason met Paul’s eyes. “It is.”

“Some would say perfect.” Paul lifted an eyebrow.

“You’re right.” Jason smiled. “It is perfect.”

Suzie looked between the two as she tried to follow their conversation. She’d never known Paul and Jason to discuss the weather.

“So beautiful, we’re going to take a walk on the beach, while Mary is resting. You two should stay. I’m sure you can find a perfect place for a perfect moment.”

“Good idea.” Jason grinned. “Enjoy your walk.”

“Oh, but I should get them something to drink and eat.” Suzie started to turn back towards the house. Paul held her close to him.

“No, we’re going for a walk.” He met her eyes. Paul was never one to command her. She wasn’t sure what to think.

“I’m not sure that I’m up for a walk.”

“Well, we need to talk.” Paul tugged her towards the sand. Suzie’s heart began to race. She was sure that Paul was trying to force the issue of the proposal. But she knew if she argued anymore things would become more awkward.

“Okay, sure.” Suzie smiled at Jason and Summer. “Help yourself to anything you like.”

“Thanks.” Jason winked at Paul. There it was. Suzie was sure that they were plotting something. Paul escorted her away from Dune House. After a few feet he paused.

“Wait Suzie, here, stand here.” He turned her to face the house.

“What? Why?”

“Please, just trust me.” Paul kissed her cheek.

“Paul, wait, please don’t.” Suzie looked into his eyes.

“What is it, Suzie? What’s wrong?” He took her hands in his.

“Paul, after everything I’ve gone through there’s no question in my mind how much I love you.”

“I love you, too, Suzie.”

“But I don’t want to get married, Paul. At least not right now. I don’t know if I ever want to. But if I did, it would be to you.”

“Married? What are you talking about, Suzie?” Paul frowned.

“I’m sorry if I’ve hurt you. I hope that you still want to continue our relationship.”

“You haven’t hurt me. I know that you’re not interested in that right now, and that’s okay with me. A piece of paper wouldn’t change how I feel about you. All that matters to me is that you are happy.”

“Really?” Suzie’s eyes widened. “But I don’t understand. What about the ring?”

“The ring?” Paul raised an eyebrow. “Oh! The ring!” He grinned. “Never mind about that.”

“What do you mean? Is it for someone else?”

“Yes, it is.” He smiled.

“So, you’re marrying someone else?” Suzie blinked back tears of panic that tried to rise to her eyes. “Is it because I won’t?”

“No, I’m sorry, Suzie, I’ve confused you. The ring is for someone else, and it’s from someone else.”

“Now, I’m really confused.”

“Just wait. I think that everything will become very clear to you soon.”

“How?”

“Look over there.” He pointed towards the deck of Dune House that overlooked the water.

Suzie looked in the direction that he pointed. She saw Jason and Summer who stood very close together. Jason took her hand in his, then lowered down onto one knee. Suzie gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. Paul squeezed her free hand. Jason produced the ring box from his pocket and lifted the lid. He held it up to Summer. Though Suzie was at a distance from the pair she was sure she detected a tremble in Jason’s hand. She looked over at Paul with wide eyes. He winked at her. The two watched as Summer smiled and wept at the same time. Finally, she nodded and Jason stood up to embrace her. Suzie felt as if she’d witnessed a very sacred moment between her young cousin and his future wife.

“Jason didn’t want to buy it from the jewelry shop because Summer’s friend works there and he was afraid she would tell Summer so he asked me to order the ring before I went out in the boat. Then I picked it up when I docked. I kept it because he didn’t want Summer to accidently find it. I couldn’t tell you or Mary because he was afraid that one of you might drop a hint. He wanted it to be a surprise so that he would get an honest answer. It looks like he got his answer.”

“Yes, it does.” Suzie tilted her head against his. “I’m so happy for him.” Paul encircled her waist with his arms.

“I love you, Suzie. Whether you want to marry me or not, whether you want to live alone forever or not. Nothing will change the way I feel about you.”

“I love you too, Paul.” She turned in his arms to face him. “You’ve made my life complete by being part of it. I don’t need anything more than that.”

“Then we’ll just keep loving each other and see where we end up. Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect.” Suzie sighed and snuggled close to him.

“Lucky Benita saved you,” Paul said.

“Yes, that bird is just as special as Priscilla always knew she was.” Suzie sighed. “I’m going to miss her when she goes back to Leanne.”

“Shall we take that walk on the beach now?” Paul asked.

“I would love to.” Suzie wrapped her arm around his and the two began to walk down the dune towards the water.

Garber would remain, as it always was, a place of tranquility and beauty.

The End

OceanofPDF.com

A FISHY DISCOVERY

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 8

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

Mary drank in the sweet sound of Summer's laughter. Sometimes she forgot that the medical examiner was still a young woman. As she studied the assortment of fabrics that Suzie spread out before her, it was clear that she was excited about her upcoming wedding.

"I can't thank you enough for allowing us to have the wedding here."

"Are you kidding?" Suzie smiled. "I wouldn't let you have it anywhere else. There are plenty of rooms for all of your out-of-town guests, and we can convert the living area into a nice buffet and bar. We'll work hard to make sure it will be perfect for you."

"It's going to be perfect, as long as Jason shows up."

Mary raised an eyebrow. "Are you concerned about that?"

"Not really. I mean, doesn't every bride worry a little?"

"I wouldn't know." Suzie grinned.

"I did." Mary laughed. "Right up until the moment that I saw him at the end of the aisle. A million things run through your mind, and it's all normal."

"Still, you don't need to worry. My cousin is an amazing young man, and quite dependable. He will be there, barring some disaster," Suzie said.

"Oh please, don't even say that." Summer shook her head and looked back at the fabrics before her. "It's hard enough to pick out a tablecloth, I don't want to even think about disasters."

"It's all going to be just fine." Mary patted the back of her hand. "I can tell you this much, you're not going to remember what color your tablecloths were or how many times you stutter during your vows. All you're going to remember is that perfect moment, when you look into each others' eyes and promise to be together for the rest of your lives. It's that moment that counts."

“I keep trying to tell myself that, but then something reminds me of things I haven’t even thought about and I start to panic.”

“No need to panic, we’re here to help you, Summer. Anything you’re worried about, you just let us know.”

“Thanks so much.” She sighed with relief. “I’m so lucky to have the two of you to give me some help with all of this. My mother isn’t really interested in organizing a wedding. She is happy I’m marrying Jason, but she doesn’t know what all of the fuss is about.”

“We’re honored to be part of it all.” Suzie ran her gaze over a list of different tasks that needed to be completed. “By the way, Paul’s friend, Robbie, should be docking today or tomorrow. We will be meeting with him to organize the amount of shellfish we will need for the wedding. If we add that to the fish Paul will supply, we’re going to have plenty of food.”

“Fantastic. I love the idea of offering a local buffet,” Summer said. “I arranged with the butcher in town to get some chicken and beef as well so there is a variety, and in case there is anyone who doesn’t like seafood.”

“Good idea.” Mary nodded and pointed to a white, linen tablecloth with small roses embroidered on the edge. “This one is pretty.”

“Yes it is, but it seems a bit flowery,” Summer said. “I was thinking something a bit more nautical would be nice.”

“Maybe this one?” Suzie dug through the pile of samples and showed her a white tablecloth with wavy blue stripes along the edges. “Will it compliment the centerpieces?”

“The centerpieces.” Summer’s eyes widened. “I haven’t even thought about them!” Panic caused her voice to grow shrill.

“Relax, we have plenty of time to put them together. Remember, decorating is my specialty. Let me pull up some ideas so that you can start to think about what you might like.” Suzie picked up her cell phone and began sorting through different options. She tagged a few that she thought Summer might like.

“What about the cake? Where are you with that?” Mary leaned closer to her.

“I know that I’m going to use the bakery in town. I know it’s just going to be two tiers and I’ve narrowed it down to four flavors, but Jason is supposed to make the final decision. He has been so busy since Kirk has been off on medical leave that he’s barely had a chance to choose anything with me.”

“I’ll make sure he gets there this afternoon, that way the baker will have enough time to prepare the cake,” Suzie said.

“Good luck. That’s why I’m a little concerned about him showing up for the wedding. At this point we’re not even sure that he’s going to be off duty on the day of the wedding.”

“Are you serious?” Mary gasped. “That needs to be settled.”

“I know, I know. But he keeps telling me his boss is trying to get someone to come in from Parish. So far it hasn’t been confirmed.”

“I’m sure they’ll find someone.” Mary smiled at her. “Just take a deep breath. By the end of today we’ll have the tablecloths picked out, the centerpieces narrowed down, and Jason will choose a cake. Right Suzie?”

“Absolutely.” Suzie nodded, then looked into Summer’s eyes. “We are in this together, sweetie. Your job is to stress as little as possible.”

“I’m trying.” She grinned and began to look through the options on Suzie’s phone. Suzie glanced at her watch. Paul was due to arrive at the dock around four, and she couldn’t wait. As accustomed as she was to him being out on the water, she still counted down the hours to when he would be back. It wasn’t so much that she missed him, but that she wanted to hear about his experiences out on the open water. He was so passionate when he spoke about them, and his skin always smelled like the ocean for a few days when he returned.

“What do you think about this one, Suzie?” Summer pointed out one of the centerpieces.

“Sure, that would be simple to do. I’ll head out and pick out some supplies. You two finish choosing the table settings. Okay?”

“Thank you so much, Suzie.” Summer handed her back her phone.

“I’m happy to do it.” Suzie winked at her then waved to Mary. She grabbed her purse on the way to the door.

The moment Suzie stepped outside she was greeted by bright sunshine. She squinted against it for a moment, then allowed it to wash over her. The view from Dune House was always a welcome sight. She looked back at the beautiful bed and breakfast by the sea and smiled. Running Dune House filled her with a sense of belonging that she had never experienced anywhere else. As she walked to her car she scanned the horizon for any sign of Paul’s boat. It was still early, but it didn’t hurt to look. Only flat open sea

was in sight. At least it was a calm day.

Suzie drove towards town and parked in front of the craft supplies store. By the time she had everything that she needed it was close to three. She walked a few blocks down to the bakery. As soon as she arrived she placed a call to Jason.

“Something very suspicious is happening at the bakery. Can you please come and check it out.”

“Suzie, are you okay?”

“Yes, but please come and have a look around.” She hung up the phone before he could say anything else.

Minutes later the siren of a patrol car wailed down the street. Jason pulled to a stop in front of the shop.

“Suzie? Is everything okay?” He jumped out of the car and rushed towards her.

“Everything is fine.” She smiled. “Now that you’re here.”

“What?” He glanced around for any sign of trouble.

“It’s time to pick a cake, Jason.”

“Suzie, I’m on duty.” He frowned.

“You’re always on duty. Summer needs you, too.”

“I just can’t right now, I’m too busy. You really shouldn’t have placed a call like that.”

“Really? Are there that many calls flooding the police station right now?”

“Well no.”

“You have your radio on, don’t you?”

“Yes.” He adjusted it on his hip. “I guess I could spare a few minutes.”

“It’s important to show Summer just how important she and this wedding are to you. So, I think it would be best if you took the time to get this settled. If I have to pin you down and force the cake into your mouth myself, I will. You know that I will.”

“Okay, okay, that will not be necessary.” He opened the door to the bakery. “Let’s pick a cake.”

Suzie followed him into the bakery. She was going to make sure that he followed through with a choice so that Summer didn’t have to worry anymore. But as she glanced over at him she was a little worried. His skin was pale, his eyes had fairly dark circles beneath them, and his general attitude was more sour than usual.

He gestured to the woman behind the counter. “I’d like to pick a wedding cake please. My fiancée, Summer Rose, said you would

have a few samples for me to choose from."

"Are you doing okay, Jason?" Suzie asked as the bakery assistant organized the cakes.

"Sure." He nodded.

"I know this has to be hard for you with your parents gone."

"Suzie, I'm fine. I'm just a little worn out from pulling all of these extra shifts. Kirk picked the wrong time to get appendicitis."

"That's for sure." Suzie shook her head. "But don't worry we have everything for the wedding under control."

"The shellfish?"

"We are arranging it today."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. Summer's family loves shellfish. You know I'm grateful for everything that you and Mary are doing to help us out."

"We're grateful to be there for the both of you. Plus, the photographs will be perfect for the wedding brochure."

"I'm not exactly model material."

"You're far more handsome than you give yourself credit for."

"I don't know about all that." He smiled as four small plates were placed in front of him.

"There's several different kinds of frosting we can do as well."

"Something light and creamy." He picked up a fork. "You're going to help me choose, right Suzie?"

"Absolutely." She laughed and picked up a fork as well. Four small slices of cake later she waddled out of the bakery with Jason. "I'm glad you found one you like."

"I just hope that it is the one that Summer liked the most, too."

"Either way you know she will like it. She'll also be very relieved to know that you ordered the cake."

Just as he opened the door to the patrol car his radio began to chatter. "Right on time." He laughed and shook his head. "Back to work."

"Thanks, Jason."

He waved to her as he drove away. Instead of walking back towards her car Suzie headed for the docks. If Paul wasn't in yet he would be in soon. When she approached the dock she was pleased to see that his boat was in the slip.

"Paul?" She smiled as she boarded the boat. "Paul?"

"How I have missed that voice!" He chuckled as he emerged from the small cabin. "I was just going to call you. How did you

know I was in?"

"I just thought I'd take a chance." She offered him a light kiss. "Good trip?"

"Yes. I got quite a haul and the weather was nice. Too nice."

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh, you know, calm before the storm. Too much good weather worries me sometimes."

"Hopefully it will be nice for the wedding."

"How are the plans coming along?" He grabbed a rag from the cabin and began wiping down the railings on the boat.

"Pretty good. The couple is nervous which is to be expected."

"I'm sure it will be perfect with you and Mary at the helm. Oh, look at that." He pointed further down the dock. "Looks like Robbie is already in. That's odd, I thought he would let me know when he got close."

"Should we go say hi?"

"Sure. I can't wait for him to meet you properly." Suzie had only been introduced to him in passing, they had never had time to stop and have a conversation. "I only really know him from the docks, but he's got great stories. He likes to talk and he's always into something." Suzie knew that Paul was a loner and only had a few friends, most of whom were fishermen.

"Sounds interesting."

He helped her down off the boat then they walked together towards Robbie's boat.

"He's a real good guy, you'll see. Hey look." He shaded his eyes as he looked out over the water. "That's Simon's boat. Simon!" He waved in an attempt to get Simon's attention. The boat continued away from the dock. Suzie expected that the man at the helm could hear Paul's hollering, but he didn't turn to look. Maybe he was busy with something or the noise of the engine drowned out Paul's voice.

"He must be busy." She tugged at his sleeve. "I'm eager to meet the man with so many stories."

"Sure." Paul stared out at the water for a moment longer. "Simon is the one who introduced us actually. Simon and I go way back, and I guess he took Robbie under his wing."

"That was nice of him."

"Nice in some ways. Dangerous in others." Paul chuckled and raised an eyebrow. Before she could question him further about his comment, he paused in front of Robbie's boat. "Robbie?" Paul

knocked on the side of the boat. “Are you in there?” He waited a moment for a response. When none came he glanced over at Suzie. “Maybe he went into town for some food.” He started to turn away, then stopped. “Hm. That’s odd.”

“What?” Suzie looked past him at the boat.

“One of the storage bins is unlocked and it’s got some shellfish in it,” Paul said as he looked inside. “Robbie would never leave it that way. Anyone could just walk up and help themselves.”

“Maybe he’s inside then and just didn’t hear us.”‘

“Maybe.” He climbed onto the boat then reached back to help her up. “If not we can just wait for him.”

Suzie steadied herself with the railing of the boat and watched as Paul glanced around.

“Robbie? Are you here?” Paul walked towards the cabin. She followed after him as the smell of fish surrounded her. “Robbie, bud, you on the boat?” Paul knocked on the cabin door.

“Paul, look!” Suzie pointed to the bottom corner of the door. “Is that blood?”

“Sure looks like it. Robbie?” He tried to push the door to the cabin open. He got it part of the way open then it hit something hard. “Something is blocking it. Let me see what’s in the way.” He stuck his head inside and gasped. “Robbie? Robbie? Are you okay?” He crouched down to take a better look. “Suzie, call Jason, call an ambulance.”

“What’s wrong?” Suzie pulled out her phone and started dialing.

“It’s Robbie. I don’t think he’s breathing.” Paul pushed the door the rest of the way open. Suzie caught sight of Robbie’s body stretched out across the floor.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

“Suzie, I can’t do a fake call right now,” Jason said quickly.

“It’s not fake I’m afraid. We need police and an ambulance as soon as possible, at the docks. Slip nine.”

“I’m heading out right now.”

She hung up the phone and squeezed through the door to check on Robbie’s vitals. It was easy to see that he was already gone and from the stab wounds it was clear that he had been murdered.

“How did this happen?” Paul stared down at his friend’s body.

“Jason is on his way.” Suzie shook her head. “He’s gone, Paul. I’m sorry.” She quickly looked over the cabin as she opened her arms to him.

He shook his head and pulled her back out of the cabin. “I just don’t understand how this could happen. Who would want to hurt Robbie?” He stared into her eyes. Suzie recognized the signs of shock in his pale skin and wide eyes.

“Let’s get off the boat. Anything we touch can taint the evidence.”

“Evidence,” he muttered. “He was murdered wasn’t he? How could that be? I just spoke to him yesterday.”

“You’ll need to tell Jason all about that. It’s important to try to remember every detail you can.”

Relief flooded Suzie when she saw Jason arrive at the docks.

“Suzie? What happened?” He jogged up to the boat. “Are you okay?”

“We’re okay, but the captain of the boat is dead.” She cringed as she pointed towards the cabin.

“Robbie.” Paul shook his head.

“Get on that boat, and take the paramedics.” Jason directed another officer. Then he turned back to Paul. “Can you walk me

through it?"

"We found him on the boat just about five minutes ago." Paul stared at him with wide, dazed eyes.

"All right just stay right here, I'm going to have some questions for you." Jason looked over at Suzie and nodded.

"We'll be here." Suzie wrapped her arm around Paul's. "Are you doing okay?"

"I'll be fine, as soon as they figure out who did this to Robbie." Paul cleared his throat.

"Look, Jason's coming back." She turned back towards the boat. Jason wore a grave expression as he approached them.

"When was the last time you had contact with Robbie?" He met Paul's eyes.

"Uh, yesterday. It was yesterday. I'd been trying to get hold of him today to see when he planned to dock, but I didn't hear from him."

"And he didn't let you know that he had docked?"

"Not a text or a radio call. I thought it was odd when I saw his boat in the slip, that's why Suzie and I came over to check it out."

"What about when you boarded the boat? Did you notice anything strange?"

"No, not really." Paul shook his head.

"What about the storage container?" Suzie looked over at him.

"Oh right. Yes, that's why I went looking for him. One of the storage containers was left unlocked. No fisherman leaves one of those unlocked, especially when it has some seafood in it. Anyone could board the boat and take whatever they want."

"Can you show me which one?"

Paul pointed to the container on the boat. "I went to find him because I knew he wouldn't leave the boat like that. But when I tried to get into the cabin." He grimaced.

"We couldn't get the door all the way open, he was in front of the door," Suzie said. "When we went through the small gap it was already too late."

"Maybe, if I had gotten in sooner." Paul frowned. "I don't know."

"There was nothing that you could have done. It looks like he's been gone for at least an hour." Jason met his eyes. "Do you have any idea who might have had a problem with him?"

"With Robbie? No, I'm not sure. I actually haven't seen him in a

while. He wasn't exactly the type to make enemies though. I mean he'd get into a bar fight now and then, but most of the time he laughed it off the next day."

"Maybe he crossed someone that didn't find it so amusing?"

"He didn't say anything to me about it. He was his usual cheerful self when I talked to him."

"Cheerful? What does that mean exactly? What did you talk about?" Jason asked.

Paul sighed. "Just the usual." He glanced over at Suzie.

"Is there a reason you're being evasive with me, Paul?" Jason spread his shoulders and narrowed his eyes.

"Relax Jason, I'm sure he's telling you everything that he knows." Suzie stared at him with a raised eyebrow.

"I think I'll be the judge of that. Paul?" Jason ignored Suzie's stare and focused his attention on Paul.

"Robbie liked to make some off color jokes." Paul frowned. "Not something I'd want to repeat around Suzie. Okay?"

"Oh please, I'm sure I've heard it all, Paul." Suzie rolled her eyes.

"Not from me you haven't, and you won't." He set his jaw.

"Can you give us a minute, Suzie?" Jason glanced over at her. "Please?"

"Sure." She nodded and released Paul's arm. She moved a few steps away from them and began to scan the dock around her. It was possible Robbie's killer was still nearby. She made a mental note of which boats were docked near Robbie's. A few people gathered at the end of the dock as the police presence became more known. She started to walk towards them to ask some questions, but before she got near them an officer cut in front of her. She sighed and backed off. She didn't want to step on Jason's toes. She turned back towards Paul and noticed that Jason had walked away from him. As she walked back up to him he turned to face her.

"Sorry about that, Suzie."

"I hope you know that you can say anything to me, Paul. I don't care about any off color jokes."

"I just don't think it's appropriate. There are a few things that I am still a little old fashioned about."

"I understand. Did anything he say help Jason?"

"No, I knew that it wouldn't. But you know, Jason, he has to flash his badge."

“Paul.”

“I’m sorry, you’re right.” Paul drew a deep breath. “I’m just a little on edge because of all of this.”

“Of course you are. How could you not be? Why don’t we go for a drive and try to clear our heads?”

“Yes, I guess that would be best. Jason said he would contact me if he needs anything else.”

“Good.” Suzie wrapped her arm around his waist and turned him towards the parking lot. “My car is at the bakery.”

“Okay. I could use the walk.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

As Suzie and Paul walked towards her car his jaw remained rigid and his eyes sharp as he looked straight forward. When they reached her car she opened the passenger door for him. He barely looked at her as he settled inside. By the time she got around to her side she saw that he hunched forward and hid his face with his hands.

“It’s okay, Paul, you have every right to cry.” She brushed her hand back through the hair at the nape of his neck.

“Cry?” His voice was muffled by his hands. When he sat up and pulled his hands away she saw his cheeks were bright red, but not a single tear stained his cheeks. “I’m not about to cry, Suzie. I want revenge. I’ve never wanted it so badly before. Robbie was just a young man. I want to find out who went on his boat and killed him.”

“I can see why you’re angry.” She took his hand in hers and gave it a light squeeze. “I’m angry, too. These things shouldn’t happen. Ever. But it has, and the only revenge that we can get is by making sure the murderer is brought to justice.”

“How?” Paul shook his head, then stared hard out through the windshield. “What if they never figure out who did this?”

“They will.” She gritted her teeth.

“I’m sorry, Suzie. I know you have a lot on your mind with the wedding. I was so looking forward to spending some time with you this evening. But I don’t think I’m going to be able to get this off my mind.”

“You don’t have to. I’m not going to be able to get it off my mind either. If neither of us are going to be able to get it off our minds, then let’s see if we can help figure out who killed Robbie ourselves.”

“How can you do that with the wedding?”

“I’ll make it work. We’d be doing this for Jason, too. In order for him to concentrate on the wedding and be able to relax and enjoy it, he needs this case wrapped up.”

“Good point.” Paul nodded. “Where do you want to start?”

“It was pretty clear that Robbie was stabbed. I think we should see what Summer has found out about the body once she’s had the chance to examine it. I don’t know if she’ll tell us anything, but it’s worth a shot. I doubt she’ll have any information before tomorrow. Until then, let’s try to get things back to normal. We can go to get something to eat or just spend some time together. Whatever you’re up for.”

“Honestly?” He met her eyes.

“Yes of course, honestly.”

“I just want some time to clear my head.”

“Why don’t you sleep at Dune House tonight?”

“No, I want to sleep on my boat.”

“Paul, do you think that’s a good idea? It could be dangerous.”

“I’ll be fine. I might be able to get some information out of the guys.”

“Do you want me to stay with you on the boat?” Suzie asked.

“No, I think I need some time alone.”

“Okay. Why don’t I drop you back at your boat? I can spend a little time with Mary, I need to update her anyway.”

“Yes, I think that would be best. You don’t mind do you?”

“No, not at all. I know that you need some time to sort through this. But call me if you need anything.”

“Thank you, Suzie.”

As Suzie drove Paul back towards his boat she knew that the best way to help him through this was to help him solve the murder.

When Suzie stopped at the dock the place was still swarming with police and paramedics. Suzie looked over at Paul.

“Are you sure that you don’t want me to stay with you? I could bring you some food by?”

“No, I’ll be fine, I promise.” He leaned close and kissed her. “Call me as soon as we can get in to see Summer, okay?”

“Sure.” She kissed him.

As she watched him walk away from the car she wondered if she should insist on staying by his side. However, she valued her own

solitude immensely, and guessed that Paul felt the same way.

Suzie pulled the car back onto the road and focused her attention on the drive back to Dune House. The closer she came to it the calmer she became. It was her place of comfort, where no matter what the problem was, everything seemed to make sense. When she parked she noticed quite a few cars in the lot. Her mind drifted to why they might be there.

Suzie stepped up onto the broad porch of Dune House and took a moment to look out over the outstretched water. The ripple of the wind across its surface stirred up subtle white caps. The calm, clear sky above it was dotted with seabirds. Her heart fluttered at the beauty of it. Yes, there was much to love about life by the sea.

Robbie died on his boat, without even stepping on dry land. The sea could be a wild, unforgiving beast, but it was a human being that could commit murder and the murderer had to be found. She drew a long, slow breath then turned and made her way into Dune House. With the upcoming wedding they hadn't booked in any guests, to keep the rooms open for the wedding guests. However, that did not mean that Dune House was empty. Instead, to her surprise, it bustled with people. Suzie smiled at each person she passed, but didn't stop to talk until she spotted Mary. She stood in the middle of the swarm of people. Her cheeks burned bright red, and her eyes had a slight glaze to them. She was fairly certain that Mary was overwhelmed.

"Mary? What is happening here?" Suzie pressed a hand against her friend's shoulder to get her attention.

"I thought I could get things moving a bit and decided to put a call out there for any assistance from the community. I wasn't expecting such a large response."

"Oh Mary, what a great idea."

"I thought so at the time, but now I wonder if I've just made a bigger mess. No one can agree on anything, and everyone wants to be chosen to provide their service. I think maybe I've gotten in over my head."

"Don't worry, we can get this fixed up. But there's something I need to talk to you about, too."

"Is it about Robbie Stillswell?" Mary met her eyes. "I've heard about that."

"Yes, it is, how did you hear?"

"Gossip travels fast around here." Mary frowned. "How is Paul?"

“He’s okay, but he was shocked, which is to be expected,” Suzie said. “He just wanted some space.”

“He’s a tough guy, Suzie, but he leans on you when he needs to. Don’t worry about the wedding, I can handle it.”

“I see that.” Suzie laughed a little as she looked around at the chaos. “Why don’t we get these people organized?”

“I mean it, Suzie, I don’t want to pull you away from Paul at a time that he needs you.”

“You’re not. He sent me away. Besides, this wedding is important to me, too. We won’t know anything new about Robbie’s death until Summer has a chance to examine him. This will keep me busy.”

“Great, because take a look at the centerpieces.” She cringed as she pointed to the pile of scraps and glitter. “So far they do not look like the pictures on the website.”

“Oh. Why?” Suzie squinted at them.

“Don’t ask, just do what you can.” Mary grinned and turned to speak to the florist. As Suzie lost herself in the frill and glitter her mind relaxed. The moment it did, the crime scene began to play out in her mind. It was simple to put together what most likely happened. Someone burst into the cabin and attacked Robbie. However, the question of who and why pressed on her until her pulse quickened. It appeared to be someone he was familiar with as there was no evidence of a struggle that she had seen.

Suzie decided that she needed a break. She stood up from the table. Several of the potential suppliers had already left, but a few lingered. Suzie overheard Mary giving specific instructions about what Summer wanted, but she guessed some of it was what Mary wanted. As the last suppliers left Suzie walked over to her.

“How did it go?”

“Well, I think. I’m just not sure if I got my point across. It’s so difficult to express to someone just how important a single detail of a single day can be. You know that my marriage didn’t turn out the way that I wanted it to, but my wedding day is still a very special memory to me. I’d hate to think of Summer missing out on that memory.”

“Or Jason.”

“Yes, or Jason. By the way, how did the cake tasting go?”

“He picked a cake. But he’s skittish. Not about the wedding. I think he’s just stressed from work.”

“This murder can’t be helping the situation.”

“No, I imagine it isn’t. He even snapped at Paul.”

“Wow. For what?”

“He felt Paul was being evasive. Which he was. But only because there were things he didn’t want to say in front of me. He was trying to be a gentleman.”

“Ah, I see.” She laughed. “He must not know what you’re like when you’ve had some wine.”

“Hey, you’re not one to talk.” Suzie grinned.

“You are so right. Anyway, at least the wedding plans are getting finalized.”

“Now, we just have to make sure that the bride and groom attend the wedding.”

“I don’t think that will be an issue. I’m going to put dinner on,” Mary said. “Is pasta okay?”

“Perfect, I’ll get a bottle of wine.”

Suzie and Mary spent the rest of the night talking about Mary’s failed marriage and how their lives had changed so much since they had moved to Dune House.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

“Morning Mary,” Suzie said as she came downstairs for breakfast the following morning.

“Morning.” Mary already had coffee and eggs ready on the table.

“Thank you,” Suzie said as she sat down in front of her plate.

“I heard the shower,” Mary said. “So I got breakfast ready.”

“I just spoke to Paul. He’s going to hang around the docks and see if he hears anything, and I’m going to work on the centerpieces and then head out to pick him up after lunch. Summer should know more about the murder then.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Hopefully there’s something about the murder that she is prepared to tell us.”

Suzie spent the rest of the morning working on the centerpieces. She had always loved decorating and found the process relaxing even though the murder often entered her thoughts.

“I’m going to see Summer now, Mary,” Suzie said as she walked into the kitchen. “Is there anything that you need from town?”

“No, I think we’re okay here. Don’t you want lunch first?”

“No thank you, I’m not very hungry.”

“Okay, tell Summer I said hi, and here.” She handed her a list. “Let her go over these details and make sure that they are what she wanted. I added a few of my own ideas and I don’t want her to think I’m taking over.”

“That’s very kind of you, Mary. I’ll show her a picture of the centerpieces, too. I’m not sure if she will like them.”

Mary looked over at the table where Suzie had worked on the centerpieces and gasped. “Suzie, they’re beautiful. She’s going to love them. They look just like a little beach.” The square centerpieces had sand and paper that was shaped and decorated to

look like crashing waves.

"It wasn't exactly what Summer wanted, but I thought it might go along with her nautical theme. But, do you think it's too over the top?"

"No, I don't think so at all."

"I guess all that matters is what Summer thinks." Suzie smiled as she snapped a picture of the centerpieces. "Call me if you need anything."

As Suzie left Dune House she sent a text to Paul that she was going to visit Summer. He texted back right away that he would be ready when she arrived. As he said he would be, he was waiting for her when she pulled up. She looked over at the police cars that were present. They still swarmed the docks, but they had thinned out a lot from yesterday. When she looked at Paul he looked like he hadn't slept. His eyes had dark rings around them, but he looked determined.

"How are you?" Suzie asked.

"I'm fine." He smiled at her. "Everyone is so tight lipped about the murder."

"Maybe they'll be more talkative once the police disappear." Suzie started to drive towards the medical examiner's office. When she arrived she noticed that there were no other cars in the parking lot, aside from Summer's. Inside the main reception room Summer was nowhere to be seen.

"Dr. Rose?" Suzie called out, but Summer did not respond.

"She's probably in the back." Suzie followed the faint sound of music. Just as she started to push the door open she froze. "You should let me handle this part."

"It will be fine."

Suzie pushed the door open slightly, but just before she called out Summer's name she stopped, she could overhear Summer speaking to someone. Suzie stood with the door slightly open and listened.

"It was something short and sharp. Not a knife. That's all I know right now. I'm checking into different weapons that might have caused the wound, but haven't found anything definitive." Suzie looked at Paul with wide eyes. There was no other voice that they could hear so Suzie presumed that Summer was on the phone. "There were no defensive wounds, but the strike did come from the front." After a short pause she continued. "Okay, I'll send over the

report now." Suzie presumed that Summer had hung up. Suzie waited a few seconds before she said anything. She didn't want Summer to suspect that they might have been eavesdropping. Summer turned on some soft music.

"Dr. Rose?" Suzie called out.

"Suzie, I'll be right out." Summer turned off the music. "I'm sorry, Paul, it helps me to concentrate," she said as she walked out of the back room.

"That's okay, you have nothing to apologize for," Paul said.

"Did you find out anything?" Suzie asked as they walked towards the front.

"You know I can't tell you anything. Jason asked me to keep it pinned up tight."

"But…" Paul started to object.

"It's okay, Paul." Suzie held his hand gently and looked at Summer. "I wanted to tell you that everything is coming together with organizing the wedding." Suzie smiled trying to break the tension. "Here is a list from Mary in case there's anything you want to change and a picture of the centerpieces." Suzie showed Summer her cell phone. "They're a bit different from what you wanted, so be honest if you like them."

"Thank you, Suzie," Summer said. "These are gorgeous."

"Sorry Summer," Paul said. "I didn't mean to put you in an awkward position. I just need to know who did this."

"I understand." Summer smiled slightly. "We'll get to the bottom of it. I know this must be difficult for you."

"I'm fine really. The only difficult thing is not knowing who did this." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Once that's settled, I'll be fine."

Suzie and Summer exchanged a quick glance of concern, but Suzie didn't argue the point.

"I'll go through the list and get back to Mary."

"Okay, let me know if you need anything." Suzie smiled.

As Suzie and Paul left the medical examiner's office Paul turned to Suzie. "Let's go over what we know."

"Well, from the phone call we know that the weapon was short and sharp and that he didn't have any defensive wounds, so he was probably surprised by the killer."

"Given that, he most likely knew the person," Paul said thoughtfully.

“Not to mention that there was no sign of forced entry.”

“Yes, but fishermen often don’t lock their cabins.”

“That’s true,” Suzie said. “But given the fact that he was attacked from the front and there were no defensive wounds it makes it seem as if it was someone that he wouldn’t expect an attack from.”

“We need to find out who that is. There is no time to waste.” Paul turned and walked towards the car. Suzie stared at him for a moment. It was clear that he wouldn’t stop until he found the murderer. Once in the car again, Paul pointed to the docks. “Can you drop me off at my boat?”

“Sure, but are you certain you don’t want to sleep at Dune House?”

“No, I’m going to sleep on the boat again tonight,” Paul said. “I want to see if I can find out anything. See if they’ll talk now that there aren’t so many police milling around.” Suzie nodded as they drove towards the docks. She knew that she wouldn’t be able to change his mind.

She pulled to a stop in front of the docks and looked over at him. “Let me stay with you.”

“No, that’s not a good idea.”

“You need to stop worrying so much about protecting me.”

“You first.” He held her gaze. His lips curled into a slow smile.

“I see your point.” Suzie sighed and leaned over to kiss him.

“I’ll see you first thing in the morning?”

“Yes. We can also talk to some of the fishermen in the morning who don’t sleep on their boats and see if anyone knows anything.”

She kissed his cheek just before he climbed out of the car. Suzie looked at him as he walked off. He needed his space and she needed time to try and work out anything more she could about the murder.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

Back at Dune House Suzie could barely get her feet on the ground before Mary rushed up to her.

"How did it go with Summer?"

"She didn't tell us anything, but we did overhear a few things about the murder."

"But, how is she?" Mary searched her eyes.

"Oh, she seems okay." Suzie frowned. "Troubled by all of this of course, and concerned about the wedding."

"Poor girl." Mary clucked her tongue.

"Summer's strong. She'll be okay. She said that she would call you about the wedding later." Suzie followed Mary into Dune House and glanced at the papers on the table. "Plans?"

"Yes, I'm still working on them. Things are a bit calmer though. What do you think about doves?"

"Real doves?"

"Yes, just a few live ones to fly out at the end of the ceremony?"

"I think it's a little much, Mary." Suzie sat down at the kitchen table and closed her eyes. "I think it might be better to keep things as simple as possible right now. It's not looking too promising that this case is going to be solved quickly and it would be a shame for the unsolved murder to be hanging over their heads during the wedding."

"Oh." Mary nodded as she sat down beside her. "I understand." She rubbed Suzie's shoulder. "Try not to worry too much, Suzie. No matter what, the crime will be solved, and Summer and Jason will be married. How it happens, when it happens, is not as big of a deal as we might think it is."

"Thanks Mary." Suzie smiled slightly. "To be honest I'm a little concerned about Paul. I'm not so accustomed to being wrapped up

in the feelings of another person."

"You get more wrapped up than you realize, Suzie. Do you remember my wedding?"

Suzie grinned and tapped her fingers on the table. "A toast to the man I will murder if he breaks my best friend's heart."

"Yes, it was the talk of the reception." Mary laughed.

"I'm sorry I didn't follow through with it." Suzie shook her head.

"You did much better than that. You created this home for us, where we both get to be ourselves."

"We created it together." Suzie held her gaze. "Dune House wouldn't be here without you, Mary. Just like Summer and Jason wouldn't get to have such a lovely wedding if it wasn't for you."

"I can't help it. I'm still a romantic at heart." She winked at Suzie.

"Speaking of romance. What's going on with your detective?"

"Oh, he's out of town. I'm sure that I'll be hearing from him this evening."

"I'm so glad things are working out."

"Yes, we're just taking it slow. No need to rush."

"True. Do you want to go for a walk?" Suzie asked.

"Yes, I could use some fresh air."

Suzie and Mary walked along the beach in a comfortable silence. Suzie's mind did not stop going over the facts of the case. By the time they had returned to Dune House the sun was beginning to set.

"I'm going to try to turn in early," Suzie said once they were inside. "I am going to the docks to meet Paul first thing in the morning so we can ask around and see if anyone knows anything about the murder."

"No dinner?" Mary clucked her tongue. "That's no way to keep your strength up."

"I know, but I'm not very hungry. Maybe I'll get up in a little while to eat."

"Okay, there's roast in the refrigerator if you want it."

"I'm sure I'll dig into it at some point. Thanks Mary." She hugged her friend then headed off to her room. As she settled into sleep her mind raced with thoughts of the case. When they finally slowed down and she was able to fall asleep, her dreams filled with rough, rogue waves that threatened the docks and Dune House.

Suzie woke in the morning to the scent of oatmeal. The cinnamon called to her. After a quick shower she threw on some

clothes and headed out into the kitchen. Much to her surprise she found Paul already there.

"Morning." He smiled at her. "I thought I'd meet you here because I wanted a walk."

"You didn't sleep, did you?"

"I did a little. Not much."

"I must have gotten all of your sleep for you. I'm starving. Thanks so much, Mary." Mary set a bowl of oatmeal down in front of her.

"No problem."

"We all have some work ahead of us today," Suzie said.

"Yes." Paul wiped a hand across his face. "I just hope that it pays off."

"We'll find something." Suzie smiled at him. "Let me text Jason and see if he has any updates."

"Do you think he will answer?" Paul asked.

"He might."

"I don't know." Paul swirled a spoon through his oatmeal. "Maybe we should just leave him out of it. I don't think he'll be very forthcoming with information. If he had information for us, he would have contacted us, don't you think?"

"You're right. He'll contact us when he wants to." Suzie nodded.

"Wait a minute." Mary frowned. "What about the wedding? If Jason and Summer are working on the investigation, then how are they going to have time to finish the preparations?"

"If you continue helping them the way you are they'll be fine," Suzie said. "I don't think Jason's going to mind a little helping hand with the investigation."

"I think he might." Mary shrugged. "But he's your cousin and he probably already knows that you won't stay out of it. You can see what you can find out and I'll continue to help Summer."

"You're right, he might mind it a little, but once the dust settles he'll understand. Besides, we're not going to cause any trouble, we're just going to help."

"Your version of help isn't always trouble-free." Mary raised an eyebrow and hid her face behind her mug of coffee.

"I know, I know." Suzie glanced over at Paul. "But we have to try."

"Absolutely," Paul said.

Suzie finished the last few spoons of her oatmeal, then turned to

Paul. “Ready?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Remember Paul, we’re just going to have some friendly conversations. We don’t want to do anything to spook anyone.”

“I’ll behave.” He smiled a little. “At least I intend to.”

“Thanks again, Mary.” Suzie led Paul out through the door. She opened the car doors with a button on her keyring. Paul climbed in, and she followed after him. When she started the ignition, music blasted through the speakers.

“What is that?” He winced and turned the radio down.

“Oh sorry, I must have been listening to a good song.” She laughed. “Sometimes I like to drive around with the window rolled down and music blasting.”

“I can appreciate that.” He smiled at her and turned the volume up enough to enjoy the current song. “I wasn’t able to get any information on the docks last night. There weren’t many people around.”

When they arrived at the docks the parking lot was devoid of any police cars. Suzie felt a sense of relief, but also a good amount of irritation. She didn’t want to be shooed away by officers, but she also wondered why they weren’t there conducting an investigation.

“I guess the police are done with the crime scene.” She frowned.

“Which is exactly why we need to pick up where they left off.” He stretched his arms and yawned. “Where should we start?”

“I think the best place to start is canvasing the dock for anyone that might have seen something. I know the police already did, but we might still be able to find out some information.”

“Some of the captains aren’t too friendly with the police, they’re not likely to give up any real information.”

“Even to Jason?”

“Yes, even Jason. Police is police.”

“I didn’t realize there was so much tension.”

“It’s not as bad as you might think, but since the main suspects are going to be people on the docks, they are going to get defensive about any questions the police ask. They’re going to get defensive about anything that I ask, too.”

“Maybe I should do the talking then.”

“Definitely not. In fact it might be better if you wait at the car.”

“But you know there’s no chance of that happening.” She smiled sweetly at him. He stared into her eyes for a moment.

“If I…”

“Nope.”

“Suzie, I think…”

“It’s not going to happen. I’m going to be by your side the entire time.” She reached out and patted his cheek. “I’m looking forward to meeting your friends, darling.”

“I think you’ll change your mind once you’ve met them.” He chuckled. “All right, let’s go.”

When she walked towards the docks she was startled by how quiet they were. Usually there were fishermen, and locals milling about. “If anyone is even out here to question.”

“They’re here, they’re just hiding out. Because of that.” He pointed to the police tape wrapped around Robbie’s boat.

“I never realized fishermen were such an unruly bunch.” Suzie raised an eyebrow.

“They aren’t always. But marrying the sea, it makes a man a bit rough around the edges.”

“Does that make me your mistress?” She winked at him.

“Never.” He held her gaze. “I’ve kept my options open, never made a full commitment.”

“Oh, I see.” She laughed and slipped her arm through his. As they stepped onto the dock, she noticed a man towards the end of it. The moment he saw them, he bolted towards one of the boats. “There.” Suzie pointed in the man’s direction. “I bet he knows something.”

“Let’s catch up with him.” Paul quickened his pace.

“I think he went on this boat.” Suzie walked towards the boat and spotted the man as he disappeared inside the cabin. She glanced back at Paul who nodded at her. Suzie mounted the boat, side stepped a container of empty oyster shells, and walked over to the cabin door with Paul right behind her. She knocked twice then stepped back. The man inside the cabin opened the door and snarled at her.

“What is it?”

“Careful how you talk to a lady.” Paul raised a bushy eyebrow and stepped in front of Suzie. “Pedro, we just have a couple of questions for you.”

“I bet, you and the entire police department.”

“No, just us.” Suzie smiled at him. “You know Paul don’t you?” She gestured to Paul.

“Sure, I know him. That doesn’t mean I’m going to say anything.”

“I’m not here to give you a hard time.” Paul rested one hand on the door frame of the cabin. “All we want to know is whether you saw anyone around Robbie’s boat. He was one of us and I’d like to get to the bottom of his murder. You can’t blame me for that, can you?”

“No, I can’t, but you know what happens once you get involved with the cops. They just like to dig into things that are none of their business. I’m not sure how you can expect me to expose myself to that.”

“No need to.” Suzie shook her head. “All we want to do is get some information. That information is going to stay between you and us, it will have nothing to do with the police.”

“Not even your cousin, Jason?” He raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I know who you are.”

“Pedro, relax. Just because her cousin is a cop, that doesn’t make her one, now does it?”

“You tell me.” Pedro crossed his arms and stared at both of them. Suzie noticed that he had a bandage around his right hand. She knew from experience with Paul that minor injuries often occurred at sea and it reminded her what a tough job fisherman had.

“I just want to find out what happened to Robbie as I’m sure you do,” Suzie said.

“How do I know this whole conversation isn’t being recorded?”

“All I want to know is whether you saw anyone.” Suzie shrugged. “How could that be used against you?”

“I’m sure that they could come up with a way.”

“So?” Paul leaned closer to him. “Did you see anything or not?”

“Since you were friends with Robbie, I guess I should tell you.” He drew a deep breath and then sighed. “I saw a guy. I didn’t know who he was. But he wore this bright yellow jacket so it was hard to miss him. He seemed to be snooping around Robbie’s boat.” He gestured towards the boat. “You know, we try to look out for each other around here, so I was going to say something to him, but by the time I got off my boat he was gone.”

“Did you see where he went? Did he go to the parking lot?”

“No, not that I saw. He was just gone. I figured I must have missed him leaving the dock somehow. Anyway, that’s all I know.”

“The man in the bright yellow jacket, was he tall? Thin?” Suzie narrowed her eyes.

“No, just about average.” He squinted. “I don’t pay much attention to that. I did notice that he was bald. Not a hair on his head.”

“I understand. Thank you for your help.” Suzie nodded at him.

“Just do me a favor and forget my name when you talk to your cousin about this.”

“I wouldn’t dream of mentioning it.” She smiled. “But I will remember it, because you did a good thing by telling us what you know.”

“Sure, if you say so.” He shrugged. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have work to do.”

“What did you do to your hand?” Suzie asked.

“I work as a fisherman. What do you think I did to it? I cut it.” He scowled.

“What about Robbie? Did you notice anything strange about him lately?” Suzie asked.

“Like what?”

“Like, anything he might have been involved in that would have led to this,” Suzie said.

“Paul, you know we stay out of each others’ business.” Pedro turned towards Paul and stared hard at him.

“Right, but one of us ended up murdered, I think it’s okay to ask a few questions,” Paul said.

“Maybe you do, but the rest of us don’t. If Robbie was into something it was his business, and I’m not going to talk about it.”

“So, he was into something?” Paul’s tone hardened.

“You would have known about that, wouldn’t you, Paul? I mean you were friends.”

“He never said anything to me.”

“Because it wasn’t your business.”

Suzie reached up and touched Paul’s arm as she noticed his muscles twitch.

“It is now.” He scowled. “If anyone has a problem with that, they can say it to my face.”

“All right, all right.” Pedro held up his hands. “I’m just reminding you of how things work around here.”

“Maybe you’re the one that needs reminding, of how we take care of our own.”

“Ouch.” He rolled his eyes.

“If you think of anything else.” Suzie offered him a card for Dune House. “I can be reached here.”

“Sure, thanks.” He nodded at her then turned away. Once they were off the boat, Paul spun on his heel and looked straight at her.

“Do you see what I mean now?”

“Yes, I do, but it’s nothing I haven’t run into before, Paul. But I noticed you got a little riled up.”

“He just got under my skin.”

“I noticed.”

“Here, let’s talk to Frank, he might have seen something. He lives on his boat and only goes out for short runs.”

Suzie let the subject drop. As she trailed after him, she noticed a few faces peering through windows on their boats. She gritted her teeth and caught up to Paul.

“Frank.” He clapped a hand on the rail of the man’s boat. Frank turned to look at him. He was big, thicker than Paul and taller, too.

“Hey Paul.” He nodded. “What do you need?”

“I just wanted to know if you saw anything strange around the dock in the past few days.”

“You mean about Robbie?” Frank stared hard at the rope he coiled around his arm.

“Yes.” Paul leaned closer to him. “Did you notice anything?”

“Only you here, asking me questions.” Frank met his eyes. “That’s pretty strange.”

“Don’t start the ‘what happens on the dock stays on the dock’ business with me. Robbie deserved better than that.”

Frank nodded slowly and returned to his coiling. “You may be right about that. I personally kept my distance. I saw him come in and out of here too many times to believe he was just catching shellfish.”

“What do you mean by that?” Paul narrowed his eyes.

“I don’t mean anything. I just said, it’s not my concern.”

“What was he into?” Paul swung his foot over the side of the boat and climbed on.

“Back off, I have nothing to say.”

“Was it drugs or something? Was he running drugs?”

“I can’t say, I don’t know.” Frank shrugged. “It’s not like I inspected his boat. All I know is that the way he kept moving in and out at odd hours was suspicious.”

“Frank, I’m not trying to drag Robbie through the mud, I just want to find out who did this.”

“Why are you asking questions about that?”

“Because Robbie was my friend, no matter what he was into.”

“No, I mean, why are you asking questions, Paul?” He looked at Paul. “I think we both know who did this.”

“We do?” Paul raised an eyebrow. “Please, enlighten me.”

“Look whose boat is right next to Robbie’s.” He pointed down the stretch of dock. Paul turned his attention in the direction that he pointed.

“Is that Mike’s?” He squinted.

“Sure is.”

“So?” Paul looked back at him.

“You didn’t hear?”

“No.” Paul shook his head. “Were Robbie and Mike having problems?”

“Is there anyone that Mike didn’t have problems with? You really can’t tell me that you don’t think that Mike didn’t have something to do with this.”

“All I can tell you is that I don’t know for sure who did. But now that you pointed out whose boat was docked beside Robbie’s, I will be having a conversation with Mike. Anything else you can tell us about that day? Anyone suspicious?”

“What about someone in a yellow jacket?” Suzie stepped closer to the boat.

“A yellow jacket?” Frank looked over at the parking lot. “I don’t think so. I mean, a few people wear them around here, but most of the fishermen wear orange jackets. It’s good for visibility. Nothing stood out to me.”

“No one sneaking around Robbie’s boat?” Paul stepped back off Frank’s boat.

“Like I said, the moment things started getting shady, I stopped paying attention. Better not to know, than to pretend not to know. You know?”

“I hear you.” Paul nodded.

Suzie handed Frank one of her cards. “If you think of anything, maybe you don’t feel comfortable going to the police about, just give me a call here.”

“Okay.” He tucked the business card into the side pocket of his shirt. “Good luck. Be careful with Mike.” He met Suzie’s eyes.

“I will be.” She smiled.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

As Suzie fell into step beside Paul, he seemed to slow down.

“I don’t know if this is such a good idea. Maybe we should let Jason speak to him.”

“Paul? Are you feeling okay?” She reached up and touched his forehead lightly with her fingertips. “I’ve never heard you talk like this before.”

“I get the point, but seriously, Mike isn’t the easiest guy to get along with. The only person he talks nicely to is his wife. I don’t want you to get into any danger. It might be better to have Jason here as back-up, instead of just barging onto his boat.”

“I don’t intend to barge onto his boat, but we also don’t have time to wait for Jason to show up and if he does I don’t think he’ll be very happy that we are talking to people about the murder. I think we should have a quick conversation with the guy at least. How bad could he be?”

“If you say so.” He nodded to Suzie. “You’re the one in charge here.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“You’ve heard my opinion, I don’t think we should go over there without back-up. Now it’s up to you to decide what we do.”

“I think it’s worth at least trying to talk to the man. He is the one who is most likely to have a view of the murder, also, he could be the killer himself. Either way we need to speak to this man.”

“All right.” He shook his head. “But my protest is on record.”

“Noted.” Suzie nodded. She approached Mike’s boat. Luckily he was outside on the deck. She watched for a moment as he polished the railing of his boat. His methodical movements didn’t make him seem like a particularly wild man.

“Excuse me, Mike?” She smiled as sweet as she could. He didn’t

respond. Paul frowned.

"Mike, we just want to talk to you for a minute," Paul said.

Still Mike swept the cloth along the railing and didn't even bother to look up at them. Paul gritted his teeth and climbed onto the boat.

"Mike. Did you hear me?"

"Get off my boat." He rubbed the cloth over the railing with sharper, forceful movements. "I didn't invite you on here. I could have you arrested for being here."

Suzie stepped onto the boat as well and stood beside Paul.

"Relax Mike, we just have a few questions for you." Paul tried to meet the man's eyes. He looked over at Suzie and shook his head.

"I'm not answering any more questions. It's pretty clear to me why you're here, and no I didn't have anything to do with Robbie's death. Not that you will believe me. So get off my boat." He finally looked up. His gaze skipped from Paul's face, to Suzie's.

"You too."

"We're not going anywhere until we get some information from you." Suzie folded her arms across her chest.

"Suzie, we shouldn't antagonize the situation." Paul put his hand lightly on one of her elbows. "Let's just go."

"No." Suzie placed her feet hard on the floor. "I'm not moving. I want to know what he knows, even if I have to stand here all day. Do you have a problem with that, Paul?"

"No, of course not." Paul straightened up beside her. "I'm here with you."

"Oh, how great. Let me just call the police. Oh, that's right, I can't, because your old lady here has family on the police force. Doesn't she?" He glared at Suzie. Suzie bit back a comment about how rude he was being.

"Jason has nothing to do with us being here. We're here because we were told you likely had the best idea of what happened to Robbie," Suzie said.

"Right. I can tell you that he was a pain in my behind. Is that what you want to hear?"

"No, that's not what we're looking for. I would think you'd be a little more concerned about a murder that took place right next door."

"I have a lot on my mind." He shoved his cabin door open. Suzie noticed a pile of crumpled laundry and an extra blanket on the cot

inside. If he was docked, why hadn't he taken his laundry home yet? Paul said that he was married so surely he didn't live on the boat.

"Mike, seriously. Just answer the question." Paul took an intimidating step forward. Suzie watched as his shoulders straightened and his chest spread. He squinted at Mike. He meant business. Mike glared right back at him with no sign of backing down.

"I don't have to answer your questions, Paul. You are nothing but a fisherman, or have you forgotten that?"

"I haven't forgotten who I am, but I'm starting to wonder if you have forgotten who you are. We're a brotherhood, we're supposed to stick together. You're really going to let someone come on these docks and commit murder?"

"A brotherhood?" Mike laughed and shook his head. "You really are ancient aren't you, Paul? There's no brotherhood here, at least not one that I'm a part of. You're going to need to drop that nonsense and get off my boat."

"I'm not going anywhere." Paul spread his feet shoulder width apart and sank his weight into his heels. Suzie sensed a confrontation building.

"Okay, we'll go." She put a hand on Paul's arm. His muscles tensed beneath her touch. "I'm sure there are plenty of other people we can ask about the man in the yellow jacket, and of course, about your whereabouts since you are so uncooperative."

"What did you just say to me?" His words were rough as he stepped towards her. Paul moved between them before Mike could get anywhere near her.

"I said, if you want to make yourself look like a suspect go right ahead. It's usually the people who have something to hide that don't want to answer questions," Suzie said.

"You have no right to talk to me like that. Get off my boat before I call the real cops and cause a scene. Is that what you want?"

"No." Paul's eyes locked to his. "I thought you might want to solve the murder of a fellow fisherman, but I guess all of the rumors about you are true."

"People can say whatever they want. I don't care. My life is not going to change based on what anyone thinks of me. You want to point a finger at me? Go right ahead. I have nothing to hide." He

pulled his phone out of his pocket. “But if you don’t move off my boat in the next five seconds I will be placing that call. Or if you prefer I could just toss your lady friend here into the drink. Hm?”

Suzie glared at him and was about to step forward to defend herself, but Paul remained in front of her and spoke first.

“Watch it Mike, I draw the line when it comes to threatening a woman,” Paul said.

“Go ahead and draw it. Your line doesn’t mean anything to me.” He pushed a button on the phone.

“Let’s just go, Paul. It’s not worth it.” Suzie tugged at his arm.

“Fine.” He nodded and followed after her as she stepped off the boat. Once they were both on the dock, Paul looked over at her with a heavy stare. “Mike’s a rough character.”

“He might be, but he’s also a possible suspect. I couldn’t walk away without at least trying to get some information out of him.”

“You shouldn’t have.” He glanced over his shoulder at Mike’s boat. “He’s the type to hold a grudge.”

“I’m not sure what it is about me that gives you the impression that there is anything delicate about me, but I can assure you I have handled many Mikes in my life, and he’s not even the worst.”

“And my point is, you shouldn’t have to do that anymore.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “You have me now. So, let me do my job, hm?”

“Your job?” She would have protested if she could have stopped smiling. “I like the sound of that.”

“Get used to it.” He winked at her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

When Suzie and Paul reached the car Suzie paused and pulled out her phone.

“I think we need to get in contact with Jason.”

“From what Summer said yesterday I don’t think he’s going to want to tell us much about the investigation. And the way he spoke to me after we had found Robbie.” Paul raised an eyebrow. “It was only out of respect for you that I held my tongue.”

“I know that, and I appreciate that. Jason is just wound up about getting this investigation completed and done correctly so that there are no bumps in the road when it comes to closing the case. You can understand that, can’t you?”

“Of course I can. But there’s only so much I’ll take. Jason already knows that.”

“Paul, don’t forget, I’m the only family he’s got. He has no one to stand with him at the wedding.” She bit into her bottom lip then looked over at him again. “In fact, I was wondering if you might like to be one of his groomsmen.”

“Isn’t it a little late for that?” Paul frowned.

“I don’t think so.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s supposed to ask.” He laughed. “Maybe you should check with him first.”

“Jason’s too proud to ask anything of anyone.”

“Well, I prefer to wait and see if he asks me himself.”

“I understand,” Suzie agreed. “I’ll see what I can get out of him about the investigation. Maybe if we talk to him in a gentle way, he’ll be willing to share information with us?”

“All right, but I think you’re the better candidate to be gentle. Hm?”

“I suppose I am.” She pulled out her cell phone and dialed

Jason's number. After the fourth ring she was about to give up.

"What is it Suzie?"

She was startled by the bite in his voice. "Jason, I'm just calling to see if there are any new developments in Robbie's case."

"The case that you've been looking into behind my back?"

"Jason?"

"Suzie?"

She gripped the phone tight and looked over at Paul before she turned away and lowered her voice. "This was a friend of Paul's we just want to find out the truth."

"Maybe so, but you should have left this to me and kept out of it."

"Well, I couldn't let it go. Can we meet and share information?"

"You think you have information to share with me?"

"Yes, I think so."

"All right. Meet me at Dune House in fifteen minutes. I can only spare a few minutes."

"Thanks Jason."

"Just remember, Suzie, you need to stay out of this from now on. Having a witness call me and complain that you have been interrogating them is a problem."

"Who called to complain?"

"Never mind that. I'll see you at Dune House."

Suzie hung up the phone and turned back to Paul. "He wants to meet with us at Dune House."

"And?" He studied her. "There's something more to it than that isn't there?"

"No, I think he's just a little uptight. He said that someone called to complain about us asking questions at the docks."

"That was fast." Paul looked over his shoulder and squinted at the boats. "I'm going to guess it was Mike."

"Yes, you're probably right."

"But if it was him then I doubt he was the murderer. Why would he want to draw attention to himself?"

"He might think that if he is open with the police they won't suspect him. Or he's so cocky he doesn't think he'll be caught," Suzie suggested. "I've seen it before."

Suzie and Paul climbed back into the car and headed back to Dune House. When they arrived Mary greeted them at the door.

"Jason is on his way to talk to me and Paul." Suzie gestured to

the large kitchen table. “We’ll use this space if that’s okay.”

“Sure, it’s fine. Any news?”

“Not exactly.” Suzie frowned. “Maybe a suspect, but not enough to go on just yet.”

“Okay, I’m going to head upstairs to finish cleaning.” As Mary left Suzie saw Jason in the entrance of the kitchen. “Hi Jason.”

“Hi.” Jason smiled. “Sorry, I don’t have long. What did you find out?” He looked straight at Paul.

“Suzie?” Paul glanced over at her.

“We spoke to a few people on the docks who mentioned seeing a man wearing a bright yellow jacket and one of the fisherman in particular gave us reason to believe he might himself be the murderer.”

“Mike?” Jason raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.” Suzie’s eyes widened. “You came to the same conclusion?”

“Yes. He’s not exactly the friendly type, but there’s more to it than that. Apparently he lodged a complaint with the dock owner. He was bothered by Robbie coming in and out at all hours. That gives him a motive.”

“A little too much noise is a reason to kill someone?” Suzie shook her head. “That seems like a stretch.”

“You met Mike, right?” Jason raised an eyebrow. “Seems to me that guy has a short fuse.”

“Maybe. Or maybe he’s just extra stressed about something.” Suzie narrowed her eyes. “He’s married?”

Jason glanced down at his phone. “Yes.”

“But he’s staying on his boat.” She tapped her chin. “Sounds like they’re having problems. Maybe that’s why he’s so cranky.”

“Maybe,” Jason said.

“I’ll make a note to talk to his wife.” Suzie took her cell phone out of her pocket.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Jason said. “You don’t want to make a bad situation worse.”

“I’m sure a friendly conversation won’t do any harm.”

“Suzie, I know my protests fall on deaf ears when it comes to stuff like this, but you need to listen to me. You cannot interfere in this investigation.”

“Okay.” Suzie put her phone away. She knew that there was no reason to argue with Jason about it as she would be fighting a

losing battle.

"Haven't you been able to find anything else out?" Paul's brows knitted together.

"I'm doing my best." He locked eyes with Paul. "I did find out his recent routes. His boat has a GPS tracker."

"And? Anything from them?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. It seems that some of the destinations are a bit odd for fishing. Would you look them over for me?"

"Sure." Paul took the piece of paper from Jason and began to look it over.

"I still think we need to find out who the man in the bright yellow jacket was," Suzie said. "If he wasn't the killer, then maybe he's a witness. We need to pinpoint who it was."

"I agree, but it's hard to find someone based on just that." Jason rubbed his chin. "Without a little more information I'm afraid we're not going to get very far."

"The witness mentioned that he was bald," Suzie said.

"Still not a lot to go on." Jason shrugged.

"This can't be right." Paul glanced up at him. "Did you get the right route information?"

"It came right off the boat's GPS tracker. We matched the coordinates to these locations." Jason squinted at the paper. "Do you see something unusual?"

"Just about all of it is unusual. There's no reason that he should have gone to some of these places. Are you certain that you got the right information?" He studied Jason.

"Yes Paul, I'm certain." Jason's tone grew short. "I know how to download route information from a GPS tracker. Why are these locations unusual?"

"It's not that the locations are unusual it's just that there's no reason for Robbie to go to some of them. Some of them are residential and one is in the middle of nowhere. There just isn't a reason for him to waste fuel traveling to some of these places. The places to fish for shellfish are much closer."

"Well, that's what was on the GPS."

"Maybe he had other business?" Suzie glanced between the two men. "Could he have been there for different reasons?"

Paul opened his mouth as if he might have something to say, but closed it again.

“Paul? Do you know anything about the locations?” Jason folded his arms across his chest.

“No. Not really. Nothing more than you would.”

“Well, then I guess we are at a standstill. The most I can do is hope that surveillance cameras caught an image of the bright yellow jacket man as he left the docks. If we can get a face we might be able to get a name.”

“Let me know if you find anything, please?” Suzie said.

“I’ll tell you what I can,” Jason said sternly.

“Thank you.” Suzie smiled.

“Do you want to keep that? It’s a copy.” Jason pointed to the paper in Paul’s hands. “That way if you think of anything you can let me know.”

“Okay. Thanks Jason.” He cleared his throat. “You doing okay?”

Jason glanced over at him. “Huh?”

“Well I mean, if you have any uh, anything you need help with for the wedding.”

“Mary’s taking care of it,” Jason said.

Suzie hid a smile as Paul rubbed the back of his neck. “I know that, Jason, but if you need any, you know advice.”

“What?” Jason’s eyes widened. “Oh, no thanks, Paul, I think I can handle that.”

“That’s not what I meant!” Paul groaned.

“I think Paul is just offering you an ear if you need it. You’re surrounded by women, Jason, sometimes it’s nice to get a male perspective.”

Jason chuckled. “All right, that was a good laugh. I needed it. Thanks Paul.” He clapped him on the shoulder. In that moment all of the tension between them relaxed. Suzie gave Jason a quick hug.

“Just let us know if you need help with anything.”

“I will.” He started to turn away, then hesitated and turned back. “Actually, I do have a problem I could use your help with, Paul.”

“What’s that?” Paul smiled.

“One of my buddies from school isn’t going to be able to make the wedding. So, I have a spot for a groomsman I need to fill. I was just going to let it go, but I know it’ll throw off the balance. I mean, I know it means putting on a suit, but if…”

“I’ll do it.” Paul nodded. “I’ll get fitted as soon as I can.”

“Great. Thanks.” Jason smiled. “All right, I’m going to see if I

can find out any more information about the murder weapon. Let me know if you two come up with anything."

"We will." Suzie walked him to the door. Once he was gone she turned and walked back to Paul. "You are going to look so handsome in a suit."

"Ha, don't get used to it." He grinned.

"A suit," Mary said as she entered the kitchen.

"Jason asked Paul to be a groomsman."

"Oh good, finally." Mary walked over to a stack of papers. "Here's the number for the tailor." She handed him a slip of paper.

"I'll check on it as soon as I can. Suzie, I'm going to head back to the boat. I have a few things I need to take care of, okay?"

"Sure, let me know if I can help with anything. I'm sure Mary could use a hand with some of this wedding stuff."

"I have to admit, I'm worn out." Mary shook her head. "I forgot just how much work planning a wedding is."

"Great. I'll see you in the morning then, Suzie. We'll head out first thing, all right?"

"Yes." Suzie walked him to the door and kissed him goodbye. Once she and Mary were alone she turned back to her with a heavy sigh.

"What chaos!"

"I agree." Mary laughed. "You should see the list of things I need to change for the wedding. It turns out that even though Summer said she didn't mind about some things she has a definite opinion about what she wants."

"How do we get ourselves into these messes?" Suzie plopped down on the couch. Mary sat down beside her.

"Because, we like to help people."

"Right, right, but why?" Suzie yawned.

"That I haven't found an explanation for. Let me get you something to eat."

"I can get it. You take a break, Mary. Then we'll go over what we can do about these wedding issues."

Suzie's mind swirled from thoughts of suits to thoughts of murder. As she tried to put every piece together and into its proper place she stood up and walked into the kitchen. Maybe there was a lot to deal with, but it was a far cry from the quiet life she'd fallen into before she ended up at Dune House. There was some beauty to the chaos that being close to loved ones could create.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

After straightening out some wedding details with Mary, Suzie called it a night and crawled into bed. She thought for sure that she would fall right to sleep. Instead she tossed and turned. Her mind filled with what they might find the next day, and also what Summer and Jason's wedding would be like. With so much to keep her awake, she could barely keep her eyes closed. After a few hours of trying to convince herself to rest, her eyes popped open yet again.

The sliver of moonlight that made its way through the curtains to slice across her bedroom floor was to blame. At least that's what she told herself as she climbed out of bed and walked towards the window. She pulled the curtains tight and walked back to her bed. When she closed her eyes again she was sure she would fall asleep. However, a few minutes later her eyes sprang open once more. Her heart fluttered with the weight of her frustration. How could she waste time laying in bed?

Driven to her feet she grabbed some clothes to change into. As she dressed she experienced a sensation of determination. She wanted to go to the docks and have a look around. She wanted to see if there was anything they had missed. Suzie slipped out of her room and grabbed her keys on her way through the kitchen. As quietly as she could she let herself out through the front door. Without hesitation she drove to the docks and parked.

Right away she noticed that Paul's boat was in darkness. He was probably sound asleep. Still, it made her feel a little more secure just to know that he was there. She walked along the edge of the dock in the hopes that she wouldn't disturb anyone. Truly, she had no idea what she was searching for. Maybe a scrap of paper? A drop of blood? Neither would be hard to find on a very populated dock.

It occurred to her that perhaps the killer disposed of the murder weapon in one of the trashcans. She stopped at the first one and lifted the lid. The smell hit her like a wave and knocked her back with just as much force. A combination of rotten fish, old gym socks, and whatever scraps of food the fishermen didn't eat, made her nostrils burn with disgust. Still, she took a deep breath, and poked her head back over the top of the trashcan. It was only half full and too slimy to dig through. She put the lid back on it, and walked towards the next trashcan. When she lifted the lid she saw that this trashcan was full to the brim. The papers that covered the top were fairly clean so she dug through them to see what was underneath. The trash shifted with her movement, but she found nothing. She sighed. She had hoped to find something, but even if there had been something to find surely the bins had been searched by the police since the murder.

Suzie walked further along the dock. She looked down at the wooden boards in despair. She walked past Robbie's boat which still had the crime scene tape around it. As she walked past Mike's boat she looked to see if there was any sign that he was on it, but there wasn't. As she continued to walk along she looked down again. She was stopped in her tracks as she caught sight of a flash of bright yellow between the boards. The moment that she saw it, she knew what she had found.

Suzie thought about leaving it there and calling the police. But what if she was wrong and she called the police for nothing. It was on the ground underneath the deck and she couldn't reach it from where she was standing, but the killer must have been able to hide it there so there must have been a way to retrieve it. She walked to the side edge of the dock and bent down. She tried to reach her arm under the wood to get the item, but she couldn't reach far enough. Suzie knew why the police had missed it, it was pretty well hidden. She lay on her stomach and extended her whole arm under. She touched something slimy and let out a silent scream, but she didn't stop trying to get the item. She needed to reach it.

With the edge of her fingertips she managed to catch a corner of the material. When she slowly pulled it up she was holding the edge of the sleeve of a bright yellow jacket. Her heart pounded as she noticed traces of blood on the hem and sleeve of the jacket. Was this it? Was this the same jacket that the killer had worn?

Suzie slowly got to her feet and with a trembling hand she

reached into her pocket for her phone. She dialed Jason's number and waited for him to answer. As the phone rang several times, she noticed a shadow further along the dock. Her heart jumped. What if it was the killer and he saw her standing there with his jacket in her hand? She panicked and climbed aboard Paul's boat. Jason didn't answer. She tried calling the police station to see who was on duty, however the voice that answered was unfamiliar so she said that she had called the wrong number and hung up. She didn't often need the police in the middle of the night and hadn't gotten to know the night staff.

"Suzie, what are you doing?" She jumped at the sound of Paul's voice. When she turned to face him, his eyes were wide. "I heard someone out here, I was ready to come out and toss you off the boat. What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't sleep." She cringed. "But look what I found." She held up the jacket.

"What is that?"

"It's the yellow jacket. I think it even has blood on it."

"And you brought it on my boat?" He narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"Sh! There's someone out there."

"Who?" He looked past her to the dock.

"I don't know. I just saw a figure. That's why I jumped on your boat."

"Okay, but it isn't a good idea to have the jacket here. I could easily be the next suspect on the list. Let's get it to Jason."

"I tried, but he's not answering his phone." She frowned. "I think I'm just going to take it over to him."

"Here, put it in this. It'll hopefully protect what evidence might still be on it." He held open a plastic bag for her to drop the jacket in. "Do you want me to come with you to Jason?"

"No, I'll be okay."

"Are you sure we shouldn't just call the police to come pick it up?"

"I don't want whoever was on the dock to know we found the jacket. Besides, if I call the police to come get it, there's no guarantee that they won't suspect both of us. I'd rather make sure it gets into the right hands."

"Okay, I trust your judgment on that. I'll walk you to your car."

"Paul, I said I would be fine." She sighed.

“And I said I’d walk you.” He stepped off the boat and reached back for her hand. She followed after. On the way to the car he looked over at her.

“Do you know how dangerous it was for you to be out here in the middle of the night?”

“Paul, this overprotective stuff has to stop. I’m a grown woman, more than capable of taking care of myself.”

“But it was my boat you jumped onto wasn’t it?” He opened the door for her.

“Yes, it was.” She kissed his cheek. “Good night, Paul.”

“Good night, Suzie. If you have any trouble let me know.”

“I will.”

The drive to Jason’s house wasn’t very long. However, in the span of time between the docks and his house Suzie managed to fixate on the man on the dock. Was it Mike? Someone else? It was hard to tell even the man’s height or build from the distance and the brief amount of time she saw him. What if he was the killer? Did he know she had the jacket? The thought made her shiver. If the killer did know, then he might just be desperate enough to hurt someone else, or disappear entirely, leaving the case unsolved.

Suzie parked outside Jason’s house and immediately noticed that the porch light shone bright. When she walked towards the house, she was surprised to hear voices from inside. Her heart beat faster as she wondered if he might be in danger. When she reached the door she recognized the second voice. It was Summer. She and Jason sounded more than a little engaged in an argument.

“Why would you even say that to me? That’s the point I’m trying to make.” Jason’s voice strained to remain at a calm level.

“It was just a question, Jason, and I think a warranted one. I don’t see why it upset you so much.”

Suzie clutched the plastic bag in her hand. She didn't want to eavesdrop on their fight, but she also didn't want to interrupt it. If they knew she was outside and had overheard them they might be embarrassed.

"It's not warranted. Asking me if I want to postpone the wedding? All I want to do is marry you, Summer, and the idea that you don't know that, that bothers me. Yes, I've been distracted by the case, so have you, but that doesn't change the way that I feel about you."

Suzie's eyes closed. She knew then that she couldn't give him the jacket. She couldn't interrupt the couple. However, she also couldn't keep the jacket. She made her way down off the porch and hurried back to her car. She would have to take it to the police station. It was her only option.

As Suzie drove in that direction she thought about the fight that the two were having. Without the pressure of the case maybe they would have blissfully wandered down the aisle. But then again maybe their relationship would only be strengthened by the tension they had to work through. When she walked up to the police station she noticed that the lobby was empty. There wasn't much activity in the middle of the night in the quiet town. She opened the door and stepped inside to find an unfamiliar face at the front desk.

"Can I help you?" He settled his gaze on her inquisitively.

"I need to turn in some evidence."

"Evidence?" He stood up and eyed the bag. "Where did you get that?"

"From under the walkway at the docks. I think that it is evidence in the murder that took place there."

"Oh?" He took the bag from her and looked inside. "So, why didn't you call for an officer to pick it up?"

"I thought I'd take it to Jason myself, he's my cousin. But I was unable to get hold of him."

"It would have been better if you called an officer."

"I understand." She bit into the side of her cheek to keep her frustration from spiraling out of control. "I don't mean to cause any problems, but I need to make sure this gets into evidence as soon as possible. I think there is some blood on it."

"Great." He started typing on his keyboard.

"My name is…"

"I know your name, Suzie. Jason talks about you all the time."

He smiled at her. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of this for you.”

“Thank you.” She sighed with relief and all at once she was struck by just how exhausted she was.

By the time she arrived back at Dune House she collapsed onto the couch. She didn’t bother to get a blanket or even take her shoes off. As she snored Mary crept into the kitchen with the first light of dawn. She started coffee and a small breakfast without disturbing Suzie. However, when there was a sudden knock on the door Suzie nearly fell off the couch.

“What? Where am I?” Suzie blinked as the ceiling spun above her.

“It’s okay, Suzie, I’ll get the door.” Mary patted her shoulder as she passed her by.

“Why did I sleep in the living room?” Suzie rubbed her eyes. As the night before began to resurface in her mind she finally embraced reality.

“Suzie? You okay?” Paul smiled at Mary as he brushed past her. “I’ve been calling all morning.”

“I’m sorry.” Suzie picked up her phone to see that it was dead. “I was so tired last night I must have just passed out. Are you okay?”

“Yes, but we were going to go on a boat trip this morning, remember?”

“Oh yes.” She yawned and blinked a few times. “Coffee first?”

“Sounds great.”

“I’ll just go have a shower quickly,” Suzie said as she headed upstairs to her room.

“Come sit, Paul, I’ll make you some eggs and toast.”

“Thank you so much, Mary.”

Suzie joined them downstairs just as Mary had finished dishing up breakfast.

“That was quick,” Paul said.

“I’m quick when I want coffee.” Suzie smiled.

As they shared breakfast Mary updated them on the wedding plans and Suzie filled her in on the jacket she had found.

“I ended up dropping it at the police station.”

“I thought you were going to take it to Jason?” Paul finished his toast.

“I did, but he was occupied.”

“How so?”

“Never mind that.” She forced a smile. “I just hope we can find

something on our trip today."

"You two, be careful out there. There's a murderer on the loose."

"We'll be fine," Paul said.

"Just make sure you're careful with her." Mary collected the dishes.

"I will be." Paul smiled. "Though don't tell her that, she thinks I'm overprotective."

"With her you have to be. She's always getting into trouble."

"I am sitting right here." Suzie rolled her eyes. "And you're one to talk about people getting into trouble, Mary. Should I tell him about the time that…"

"No, don't do that." Mary laughed. "Just be careful."

"Don't worry, I have no interest in going for a long swim." Suzie stood up and washed the dishes that Mary piled in the sink. "I think we'd better head out though."

"I'm ready when you are." Paul stood up.

"Mary, call me if anything goes wrong with the wedding plans, okay? We're in crunch time now."

"Trust me, you will be the first person I call."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

As Suzie and Paul walked to the docks Suzie tried to call Jason. She heard his voicemail.

“He’s not answering.”

“What happened last night?”

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of Mary, because I don’t want to worry her about the wedding, but Jason and Summer were fighting when I showed up. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Oh boy.” He breathed out a heavy sigh. “How bad was it?”

“That’s the funny part. They were fighting about how much they cared about each other. It was kind of sweet actually.”

“Hm. That’s a good sign.” He smiled. “Do you think they’re going to make it to the end of the week?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“It might be a better idea to just postpone the wedding.”

“No, no.” Suzie shook her head. “It will ruin the magic.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in the magic?” He smiled.

“I believe in their magic. If they postpone the wedding, then what’s to stop them from postponing it again when something else comes up?”

“You mean if someone else ends up dead?”

“Don’t say it like that.” She frowned. “But yes, that’s what I mean. Or some other disaster happens. They picked this date for a reason. It was the day that they went on their first date. They really want the wedding to happen then.”

“Well, then we better get this case solved before then.”

“Good plan,” Suzie said when they reached the docks. Suzie’s attention shifted right away to one of the boats.

“Let’s get out onto the boat.” Paul started to head towards it.

“Suzie wait!” Mary's voice made her turn back to the parking

lot. As Mary approached Suzie waved to her.

"Mary, what are you doing here?"

"We have a big problem."

"What is it?" Suzie studied her friend.

“The cake. It isn’t going to be ready on time. I guess there is some kind of shortage of the type of chocolate that she planned to use and now they won’t have it ready for the wedding.”

“So, tell them to use a different chocolate.”

“She won’t, she says that is the only chocolate that will work in that cake. We need to order a different cake. I’ve been trying to reach Jason, but he’s not picking up his phone. So I went by his house, and he’s not there. I went by the police station, and he’s not there either. I’m starting to think that he took off.”

“Took off?” Suzie raised an eyebrow. “Jason, I don’t think so.”

“Wedding jitters?” Paul frowned. “I doubt Jason would do that.”

“Then where is he?” Mary asked.

“Maybe he went to speak with Mike’s wife. Or maybe he’s following up on another lead. He might have forgotten to charge his phone, just like I did. Mary, I’m going to be honest, Jason isn’t going to care what kind of cake it is. Just pick one out of those that Summer originally chose, and the frosting, and it will be fine.”

“Okay, I’ll head right over to the bakery. But if you hear from Jason, let me know. I’m worried about him.”

“Jason can handle just about anything. I’m sure he’s fine. But if I hear from him you’ll be the first to know.”

“Thanks Suzie. I'd better get to the bakery right away.” As she hurried off Paul gave Suzie’s hand a tug.

“Look who’s here.”

“I know, I noticed right away. He’s been watching us. But it looks like Pedro has his eyes on us, too.” She noticed him looking at them out of the corner of his eye.

“Yeah, fishermen don’t like it when people step on their turf. I want to go talk to Mike.”

“Let’s get going, Paul. We probably shouldn’t rile him up again.”

“No, I’m going to find out once and for all if he saw that man that Pedro saw. If he did, then we might be able to figure out who it was. I’m not going to let Robbie’s death go unsolved because Mike has an attitude problem.”

“Just remember to keep it mellow, Paul. We don’t know if he’s the murderer and we can’t afford to add another complication to

this situation."

"I'll be good, I promise."

Suzie studied him for a moment. She wasn't the slightest bit reassured. She followed him to Mike's boat. The moment that Mike spotted them headed towards him he groaned.

"What do you want?"

"Mike, I want to know if you saw a man wearing a yellow jacket hanging around Robbie's boat. Don't hold out on me or you will pay for it."

"Oh, look at you big tough guy?" He laughed. "Showing off for the girlfriend?" He rolled his eyes. "Nice try, pal, but there's not one hair on your bushy head that intimidates me."

"Enough." Suzie pushed past Paul and climbed onto the boat.

"Again with the trespassing?" Mike glared at her. "You think because you're a woman I won't throw you right into the water?"

"Watch it!"

"It's okay, Paul." Suzie turned back to Mike. "I know that you probably want to actually. Considering the problems that you're having with your wife, you probably have a lot of anger at the moment."

"She told you about it?" He frowned.

"No, I haven't even spoken to her. I noticed that your laundry is piled up and you're sleeping on your boat. What's going on with your wife, Mike?"

"It's none of your business."

"No, it's not. But sometimes it takes a woman to explain a woman. I might be able to help give you a little insight into what's going wrong."

He sighed and rubbed his hands together. "She wants me to give up fishing."

"What?" Paul's voice softened. "Really?"

"She says I don't spend enough time with her, I'm always gone, and she's always worried. She knew what I did for a living when we got married. Now, all of a sudden it's a problem."

"Oh Mike, it's not a problem." Suzie smiled warmly at him.

"Huh? How is it not a problem?"

"She's just showing you how much she loves and values you. You see it as her trying to take away your passion. But what she's really trying to do, is hold as tight as she can to you. She's scared of losing you. Maybe you've been a little too distant lately, not taking

the time to show her how much you value her. Those things add up in her mind, and soon she thinks the only way to save the marriage is to have you at her side all the time. I'm pretty sure if you just talk to her about what might be bothering her, you two can work this out."

"I never really thought about it that way. I have been distracted lately. I have more runs than I can handle sometimes." Mike's expression relaxed. "I'll talk to her about it. Maybe I need to cut back."

"Oh, and you know what? There's a perfect opportunity for that conversation. A special romantic dinner at Dune House and a room for the night."

"I can't afford that." He scrunched up his nose.

"You don't have to. It's on the house. A little romantic evening will soften her heart to you. It's a great time for the two of you to reconnect."

"Really. For free?"

"Yes, if you tell me about the man with the yellow jacket, it will be." Suzie set her hands to her hips and looked straight into Mike's eyes. "We're all after the same thing here. Right?"

He nodded slowly. "All right. I did see him. In fact I saw him right next to Robbie's boat. I didn't know what he was up to, but I figured it had something to do with Robbie, and I didn't want to get involved."

"When did you see him?" Suzie held his gaze.

"A few hours before Robbie turned up dead and then an hour or two before. I remember because I thought he had been snooping around for quite a while."

"And you never mentioned this before?"

"Look, it's not like I got the man's ID or something. I don't know who he is."

"Did you notice anything about him physically?"

"He was a bit thicker than most. He also had his jacket hood covering his head the second time I saw him, which was strange because it wasn't raining and it wasn't that cold."

"Anything else about him stand out?" Suzie tried to keep a soothing tone to her voice. "Maybe a hair color, a scar, something about the way he walked?"

"Sure. He had this strange wiggle to his left toe. No. It's not like I dated the guy." Mike rolled his eyes. "I told you all I could. All

right?"

"All right." Suzie nodded. "Thanks for the information. I'll make sure you and your wife have a free night at Dune House and dinner as promised. We can arrange the date for any time after this weekend. Okay?"

"Thanks. That is if I can convince her to come. I don't think me being a murder suspect is going to make her too eager."

"Don't worry about that." Suzie patted his arm. "Just cooperate with the police and focus on what you can do to remind her of just how much you care."

"Okay. I will."

As Suzie stepped off the boat, Paul offered his hand to steady her. She took it, along with a deep breath. "It seems to me that whoever this man in the yellow jacket was, he had a very strong interest in Robbie and his boat."

"Yes, let's see if we can track him down at one of these locations." He led her to his boat and they climbed on. Once they were off to sea, Paul looked over at her. "You were amazing with Mike."

"I just tried to reach his heart." Suzie shrugged. "A man like that, you can't come at him, you have to work your way around all of the anger to get to the good stuff."

"Kind of like me?"

"No, nothing like you." She kissed his cheek. "You're all good stuff, Paul. You just think you have to be tough."

"Just like you." He smiled.

"Yes." She laughed. "Just like me."

Suzie looked out at sea and suddenly felt nervous at the thought that maybe she had just invited a murderer to stay at Dune House. However, one glimpse of Paul relaxed her. As the minutes passed she relaxed more and she began to run through possibilities in her mind. As kind as she'd been to Mike, he was still a suspect. So was the man in the yellow jacket. So far the only lead they had was that it appeared that the killer was someone that knew Robbie. She hoped that retracing his steps that day might lead them right to the killer.

"Here's the first stop." Paul pulled up to a small residential dock. When he did Suzie looked out over the sloped backyard that extended from the water. To her surprise, a flash of bright yellow caught her attention. The moment she saw it she couldn't believe it,

but a second later she was certain. Even from the distance she could see that the man had no hair.

“Paul, that’s him! The man from the docks that Mike and Pedro saw!”

“Where?” Paul jumped off the boat onto the dock.

“There, just past the trees. See?” She pointed to a clump of trees in the yard.

“Yes, I do.” Paul began to run towards the man. Suzie climbed off the boat as fast as she could. She had no idea how Paul might react once he got his hands on the man that might be responsible for Robbie’s death.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

By the time Suzie caught up with the man in the yellow jacket, Paul had already tackled him to the ground. He had him pinned beneath him.

“What are you doing? Let go of me! Help!” The man beneath Paul screamed as loud as he could. Suzie’s gaze fixated on the bright yellow shade of his jacket.

“Stay down and I won’t have to hurt you.” Paul’s gruff voice was strained with the force it took to hold the man down.

“Don’t hurt me, please. What do you want?” The man grew still. It struck Suzie that he didn’t act or speak like someone that was guilty. He didn’t act like a murderer.

“Paul, let him up.”

Paul stood up and kept one hand on the man’s arm as he got to his feet. The man turned to look at Suzie with wide, fear filled eyes. His stricken expression combined with his slight frame made Suzie’s heart drop. Suzie continued to study him, he certainly wasn’t thick set like Mike had said.

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t know. Why are you two doing this to me?”

“Why did you murder Robbie?” Paul held his arm tight in his grasp.

“Murder Robbie? What are you talking about? You two have the wrong man.” He straightened his shoulders. “Let me go, and I won’t call the police. Just let me go, and we can forget all of this ever happened.”

“I don’t think we can do that.” Paul narrowed his eyes. “Several witnesses place you at and around Robbie’s boat just hours before he was killed.”

“Wait a minute, that Robbie? He’s dead?” He looked between

the two. “Someone killed him?”

“Someone in a bright yellow jacket with a bald head.” Paul pulled him closer.

“Wait a minute, Paul. Let’s just hear him out.”

“I don’t know what you think you saw, or anyone else saw, but I had nothing to do with Robbie being murdered.”

“What were you doing near his boat then?” Paul eased his grip on the man’s arm.

“I’m a mechanic. Not a boat mechanic specifically, but an engine is an engine. Robbie asked me to look at his boat because he’d had some problems with it. That’s all I did.”

“How come I’ve never seen you around the docks before?” Paul glared at him.

“Because I’m new to the area, I used to work in Parish.”

“What’s your name?” Suzie pulled out her phone.

“Gill, Gill Smith. You can look it up.”

Suzie typed the name into her phone and saw that Gill Smith was indeed a mechanic. “So Robbie hired you?”

“Yes. Well, not exactly. He paid me in shellfish.”

“I see.” Paul met Suzie’s eyes over the top of the man’s head. “What repairs needed to be done?”

“How about you try telling me who you are first?” He pulled his arm from Paul’s grasp. “And maybe why you tackled me?”

“I’m Paul, and this is Suzie. Robbie was a friend of mine, and I’d like to find out what happened to him. Since the description of the man last seen around his boat included a bright yellow jacket and Robbie came to this location on the day of his murder I assumed that you might be involved in his murder.”

“And tackled me.” He cleared his throat. “Well, you’re wrong. I had nothing to do with any murder. However, someone was certainly out to get him.”

“Why do you say that?” Suzie stepped closer to him.

“Because it was a new boat and the repairs I needed to do to the engine were not from wear and tear. Someone sabotaged it, on purpose.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Trust me, I’ve been working on engines for over twenty years. I know when something is from wear and tear, and when someone wants to keep a boat from going out on the ocean. Someone did just that to Robbie’s boat. He picked me up late in the morning and

asked if I could listen to the sound he was hearing. So we went on a little ride around and I did hear it. I told him I'd work on it for him."

"Did you ever tell him what you found out about the boat?" Paul stepped forward. "Maybe he confronted whoever he thought sabotaged it?"

"No, I never had the chance. He had some things to do in town so he left me there. I worked on his boat, repaired it, then took my share of the shellfish out of one of his coolers that he'd left open for me. He hadn't come back. I called him, he didn't answer. So, I caught a ride back to my place with another fisherman. I had no idea what had happened until now." He lowered his eyes. "What a shame."

"Do you have any thoughts on who might have sabotaged the boat? Did Robbie mention having any problems with anyone? Maybe he was upset when he picked you up?" Suzie asked.

"I'm sorry." He shrugged. "Robbie, was just Robbie. I didn't notice anything different."

"Maybe he took a phone call? Or he mentioned having a meeting with someone later in the day?" Suzie frowned. "I'm sorry I don't mean to push, but you might have been the last person to speak with Robbie, other than his killer."

"I wish I could help more. If I had known that Robbie was going to be killed, of course I would have paid more attention. But I didn't. To me it was just a regular day. Anyway, you can check his phone and see that I called him about the boat. I left him a message to let him know that it was fixed and to call me so I could explain what had happened."

"Thanks Gill." She looked over at Paul.

"Sorry about the rough handling." Paul offered him his hand for a handshake. "I should have asked questions first."

"Yes, that would have been good." Gill ignored Paul's hand. "I hope you find out what happened to Robbie. But I had nothing to do with it."

"Thanks for your time." Suzie started to turn away, then thought better of it. She turned back. "Gill, just one more thing."

"Yes?" He looked over his shoulder at her.

"Did you happen to lose your jacket at the dock?" The bright yellow jacket he wore was almost identical to the one she found by the docks. She thought that maybe he had replaced it with a new

one or had two of them.

"No. I only have this one." He brushed the sleeves of his jacket. "My daughter bought it for me a couple of years ago."

"Okay, thanks again." Suzie followed Paul back to the boat. As they drifted at the dock she leaned against the railing.

"Do you believe him?" Paul turned on the boat's engine.

"I'm not sure." Suzie stared at the backyard as they drifted away from it. "On one hand, maybe. He clearly didn't act guilty of anything."

"I feel awful for tackling him." Paul grimaced. "I guess I should have thought that through."

"It wasn't the best, but no harm was done. Don't let it get to you. You didn't know that he might not be the right guy."

"Might not? What makes you suspicious? He said he took the shellfish out of the cooler, that's why it was left open. He also said he got a ride on a different boat. That explains his disappearing act."

"But why did I find a yellow jacket with blood on it?" Suzie shook her head. "That's what I can't figure out. If it wasn't Gill who wore the jacket, then who did?"

"Maybe someone saw him around the dock and decided to frame him for the murder."

"You could be completely right about that. I hadn't even considered it. Someone might have framed him, and I was ready to fall right into it."

"It's a stretch, but the yellow jacket does make me wonder. Maybe someone used it as a cover to get onto the boat. Maybe Robbie only saw the yellow jacket at first and thought it was Gill."

"Maybe. Where are we headed now?"

"I'm just following what was in the GPS I have no idea what he would be going out to this location for. There's practically nothing there."

"I'm going to try Jason again. I want to make sure that he knows about Gill."

"You can try, but reception isn't always great out this way."

Suzie dialed the number and waited for Jason to pick up. As Paul had predicted the call did not go through.

"How much further, Paul? Maybe once we're on land again I can get a signal."

"Just about ten minutes." When he got closer to the location he

slowed the boat.

“Oh, look at that, I guess there is some property out here. This must be where Robbie went. We should have a look.” Paul squinted in an attempt to read a small no trespassing sign.

“We better be cautious we might get into trouble if we get out and walk up to the building?” Suzie said.

“We should be fine. Just stick close to me. We don’t know what we might be walking into.”

“I will.” Suzie was always cautious from her days as an investigative journalist, but that never stopped her from investigating.

Paul stepped off the boat onto the rocky shore first. Then he reached back for Suzie’s hand. She leaned on him to steady herself on the slippery rocks. In the distance there was a long, single story building. It was very plain on the outside, similar to a warehouse.

“You said you didn’t know this was here?”

“No, but I haven’t been out this way in a long time.”

“Let’s see if we can figure out what this place is.” As she started to walk towards the building, something she spotted out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. It was a long, black cylinder that sunk into the water just beyond the shore. “Paul, what do you think this is?” She crouched down beside it. Paul crouched down as well.

“I’m not sure, but don’t…” Suzie reached out and pulled the cylinder out of the water before Paul could finish his sentence. Classical piano music filled the air.

“It’s a speaker?” She raised an eyebrow. “Why in the world would anyone be playing music under the water?”

“Don’t you touch my babies!”

Suzie looked up to see the barrel of a shotgun pointed at her. Her heart dropped.

“Suzie, get back.” Paul lunged in front of her. The man who wielded the gun looked to her as if he was only a few years into his twenties. His stringy hair was pinned beneath an old, faded baseball cap.

“Please, we don’t want any trouble.” Suzie raised her hands in the air. The speaker splashed back into the water.

“No, you just didn’t want to get caught, but you have, so now you’re going to pay.”

“That’s enough, son, put down the gun.” Paul started to stand

up.

“Don’t you move a muscle, old man, or I’ll make sure that you never get back on your boat.” Suzie put a hand on Paul’s shoulder to restrain him. His protective instincts were likely trying to convince him to tackle the man. But Suzie could see from the wild look in the man’s eyes that he was not bluffing.

“Nobody is going anywhere. You’re in charge here. My name is Suzie, what’s yours?” She kept her voice as soft as possible.

“Like a thief is going to tell me her real name. You two just sit tight until the police get here. Then you’re going to pay back every dime for the pearls you’ve stolen from my family.”

“This is all a misunderstanding. My cousin, is a police officer in Garber. Maybe you know him? Jason?”

“Jason is your cousin?” He lowered the gun some, but kept it pointed in her direction.

“Yes. I took over Dune House in Garber. Have you been in town to see it since the remodel?”

“Yes.” He lowered the gun a little more. “If you own that place, why are you stealing my oysters?”

“I’m not.” Suzie narrowed her eyes. “Has someone been stealing them?”

“Yes.” He looked over at Paul for a long moment then finally lowered his gun the rest of the way. “I thought that’s what you were doing.”

“Not at all.” Paul met his eyes. “We are here about the death of a friend of mine. I didn’t even realize this was a pearl farm. You haven’t been out here too long have you?”

“No, we haven’t, just over a year. If people keep stealing from us we won’t be out here much longer either. Who’s your friend?”

“Robbie Stillswell.”

“Robbie.” He narrowed his eyes. “I’ve met him before. What happened to him?”

“He was killed,” Paul said. “We’re not sure by whom.”

“I’m sorry. That doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

“We’re here because this location was listed on his GPS as a place that he traveled to. Have you spoken to him recently?” Suzie asked.

“Here? No. He’d have no reason to be here that I know of.” He shook his head. “I could check with my mother.”

“Is she available now?”

“Sure. Follow me.” He turned and walked towards a path. Suzie hesitated for a moment. Was it safe? The man had pulled a gun on them just a few minutes before. She grabbed Paul’s arm.

“Do you think we should go with him?”

“We’re out here. If he tries anything, I’ll put him down.”

She shook her head and smiled at him. “So tough. I guess you can snatch a bullet out of midair, too?”

“I sure would try.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Let’s catch up, I’m not too keen on the idea of getting lost out here.”

“Why do you think Robbie would have come here?” Suzie asked.

“I have no idea. Maybe he got lost.”

She nodded and they walked together down the path. Not far along she noticed a large house that looked similar to Dune House only on a smaller scale. There was a sign with an arrow pointing towards the house. The sign said ‘Inn’.

“An inn in the middle of nowhere. Why is that?”

“It’s probably because it’s a good way to maintain a profit if the pearl turnout is low. Many people would like the secluded area and beautiful beaches.”

“Do you think that Robbie might have stayed here? That might be why this location was on his GPS.”

“It might be. Or maybe he came here to visit someone who stayed here or works here.”

“It’s possible, or maybe he even got lost.”

“Wait here, I’ll get my mother.” He ascended the wide porch. Suzie lingered beside Paul and watched as the man disappeared inside the house.

“I’ve never even heard of a pearl farm before,” Suzie said.

“It’s not too common around here. In fact this is the only one I know of in this area. They haven’t been around very long and must be trying to get a foothold.”

“It’s funny though, I’ve never really thought about how pearls are harvested. Is that why there was a speaker in the water?”

“Uh, that seems a little odd to me, but I’m sure they have a reason.” Paul smiled.

The front door opened and a small-statured woman stepped out. She had long, gray hair that hung loose around her shoulders and well past her waist.

“What is it?” She put her hands on her hips. “This is private

property you know."

"We're only here to ask a few questions." Suzie stepped forward. She assumed that perhaps the woman would be more comfortable speaking with her, than with Paul.

"Do I look like a librarian to you? If you want information, that's who you should talk to."

"We don't mean to bother you, but this is in regards to a murder investigation. Do you think you could spare a few minutes to answer some questions?"

"Murder investigation? Who's dead?" She narrowed her eyes.

"A friend of mine." Paul removed his hat and stepped forward. "Robbie, a fisherman."

"Robbie? Oh, he was just a young man. I've met him a few times. But why do you want to ask me questions about him?"

"This location was listed on his GPS. Do you have any idea why that might be?"

"Well, I can't really say. I haven't spoken to him. But we do have guests that stay here. I don't keep track of their visitors. Just about the only way to get out here is by boat. The dirt track takes ages. Maybe he came by to meet with someone."

"You don't keep records of the boats that come in and out?"

"No. We barely have anyone come out here anyway."

"Your son greeted us with a gun. Is that how you always greet guests?"

"We weren't expecting any new guests. However, over the past couple of weeks we've had someone stealing some of our pearls. I'm sure Junior just assumed that might be you, since you two decided to show up without calling ahead and we weren't expecting anyone. A courtesy call could have prevented all of those problems."

"Fair enough." Suzie nodded. "What about your guest registry? Could we see a copy of that?"

"Sure. I'll get it for you. Just wait here." She went back into the house.

"See? Not too bad." Paul smiled at Suzie.

"You do know she's not coming back, right?" She raised an eyebrow.

"She's coming back." Paul looked towards the door. "Any second now."

Suzie glanced at her watch. Then she looked back at him. After a few minutes passed she glanced at her watch again.

“All right, all right.” Paul sighed. “You were right. She’s not coming back.”

“Should we knock?”

“If she’s not going to cooperate there’s no point. I’m sure that Jason will have better luck getting the information from her. Let’s keep going to the list of locations.”

As she walked back towards the boat Suzie thought about the thefts at the pearl farm. By the time she reached the boat she knew that she was going to have to broach the subject with Paul.

“Do you think that Robbie might have been the one stealing the pearls?”

Paul gritted his teeth as he helped her on board. “I’d rather not think that.”

“I don’t know. Remember that he was coming and going at odd hours.”

“Says Mike, who is our prime suspect.”

“Not just Mike.”

“Suzie, until we get solid information that he was involved, I don’t even want to consider it.”

“All right.” Suzie nodded and settled into silence as he pulled up the next location on the GPS.

“There’s not much point to going out to Simon’s place. If Robbie went out to see him it was just to visit. Simon’s been a friend of ours for years.”

“Still, it might be good to find out what he spoke to Simon about, or whether Robbie acted strangely. We did see Simon’s boat pulling away right before we found Robbie.”

“That’s true. I wouldn’t mind checking in with Simon anyway. If we’re lucky he might offer us lunch. He has a way with seafood, it’s always been the best I’ve ever tasted.”

“Mm, sounds delicious.” Suzie settled into a seat and stared out at the water.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

As Suzie and Paul sailed towards Simon's place Suzie was lost in thought as she looked out at the large expanse of water. In her mind she tried to form a timeline of what might have happened from the time that Robbie launched in the morning until the time he docked and met his murderer. It was hard to place exactly where he was at what time as the GPS only recorded the time when the boat stopped at the specific coordinates, and not how long the boat was in each particular location.

The fact that Robbie's death came not long after there were a few thefts at the pearl farm was something that Suzie could not shake. Could it really just be a coincidence? She knew that Paul wanted to believe his friend was an honest person, but some of the information she'd gathered so far about him, indicated that he might lead a different lifestyle than Paul was aware of.

"Not far now." Paul slowed the boat. Suzie stood up and watched as they approached a short dock. The dock was littered with lounge chairs, coolers, and fishing poles. It looked very well used. Paul eased the boat to a stop. "Let me just give him a call and let him know we're here."

As Paul made the call Suzie focused on every detail of the dock. If it was one of the last places that Robbie had been, there might be a clue as to what had happened to him.

"Hey buddy, it's Paul. I'm at your dock. Are you free?" Paul looked over at Suzie and nodded. "Sure we'll be right up. Yes, I brought her." He chuckled. Suzie raised an eyebrow as he hung up the phone. "He's looking forward to meeting you." He grinned. "I think he thought I'd made you up."

"Really?" Suzie laughed. "That's silly."

Paul smiled and gave her a light hug, then climbed off the boat.

He turned back to help her off as well. They walked up a small hill to a single story house. It didn't look like it was in the best repair. The yard was scattered with half-finished projects and piles of wood that waited to be chopped. Music drifted through the open windows of the house. Suzie recognized the melody. It seemed to her that Simon had an affection for classical music. Paul led her up to the back door of the house. He knocked once, then opened the door.

"Come on in the kitchen, Paul!" Simon's voice bellowed from around the corner. Paul took her hand and turned down the hall to the kitchen. A wonderful scent greeted her just before a man with only an apron for a shirt walked towards her with his arms wide open. "You must be Suzie!" He wrapped his arms around her before she had the chance to stop him. Not only did he hug her, he lifted her right up off the ground. When he released her she plopped back down on the ground with a laugh.

"Nice to meet you too, Simon."

"Sorry, I should have warned you, he's a little physical." Paul put his hands up before Simon could hug him, but Simon still wrestled his arms around him. "How are you, pal? I haven't seen you in a while."

"I know, I've been a little, occupied."

"I can see that." Simon chuckled. "Lucky man. You two hungry? I've got lunch on the stove ready to go."

"That would be great." Paul nodded.

"Sure, just settle in, I'll get you some plates." As Suzie and Paul sat down at the table Simon tossed a pack of paper plates towards them. Paul pulled some out.

"Did you hear about Robbie?"

Simon froze, then turned to face Paul. "I figured that might be why you were here. I heard."

"I should have called you." Paul frowned.

"It's all right. It's hard to talk about."

"You saw him yesterday?" Suzie met his eyes. "How did he seem to you?"

"I didn't see him yesterday." He sat down across from them with a plate filled with an assortment of seafood.

"Oh? The GPS on his boat said he traveled here," Suzie said.

"Well, I must have missed him. What a shame. I was out fishing yesterday. I wonder why he stopped by?"

"It's hard to say." Paul shook his head. "He was probably just

coming by to say hello."

"Maybe." Simon narrowed his eyes. "I wish I knew though. It's hard to think of someone's last hours, and knowing that they wanted to see you, but didn't get the chance."

"It is." Paul took a bite of his food.

"We saw you leaving the Garber docks yesterday. Didn't you see him then?" Suzie asked.

"No." He shook his head. "I never docked. I just passed nearby on my way back home from fishing."

"Do you know anything about that pearl farm in the area?" Suzie nibbled some of her food and then took a larger bite. Paul was right, it was the best she'd ever tasted.

"Uh, I heard about it." He nodded. "The word around town is that they're struggling. They are real reclusive folk. Not the type to make friends with. So, I've kept my distance."

"I didn't even know they were out there." Paul shook his head. "Just discovered them today. Can you think of any business that Robbie might have had out there?"

"At the pearl farm?" He spoke between bites of food. "No, not really."

"Do you remember that girl that he was sweet on?" Paul laughed. "Maybe she was from the farm."

"Oh, that's right?" Simon nodded. "Maybe she was."

"Really?" Suzie raised an eyebrow. "She seems a bit old for him."

"No, this girl is young, she's probably about twenty. He had a thing for her," Simon said. "I don't think she was from the pearl farm but maybe she was. I don't know if he ever approached her."

"Do you remember her name?" Suzie asked.

"He mentioned it, but I don't." Simon shook his head.

"I think it was April? Or May? Some calendar name." Paul shrugged. "I think we can rule out December." He laughed. Suzie looked over at him with an amused smile. He seemed so relaxed around Simon.

"If you happen to remember can you let Paul know?" Suzie looked at Simon. "That crowd over there is not very welcoming, and since we were greeted by a gun, there's a good chance they had something to do with Robbie's death."

"It's a shame." Simon hung his head. "He was just starting out really. Could have done well for himself. I guess he stuck his nose

into something he shouldn't have."

"Why do you say that?" Suzie locked eyes with him.

"Ain't that always how someone ends up dead?" He stared back at her with a gaze so cold that her heart dropped. She glanced over at Paul to see if he had noticed, but Paul was too busy taking the last few bites of his food to notice. She shivered and lowered her eyes. Maybe it was just her imagination, but it seemed to her that Simon meant his words as a threat.

When they had finished up their meal Simon led them out into the back. He talked to Paul about all of the projects he planned to finish. Suzie tuned out as she sorted through her own thoughts. Was she overreacting to the way that Simon had spoken to her?

"I guess we'd better head out." Paul placed a hand on the small of Suzie's back. "Don't want to be out in the dark."

"I heard that there's a fierce storm rolling in tomorrow. Keep an eye out for it," Simon said.

"I will." Paul nodded. "Thanks for the warning."

"Wait. We should get a picture." Suzie pulled out her phone and smiled as the two men huddled around her. As she snapped the selfie she reminded herself that Simon was a friend of Paul's, and that meant she needed to give him the benefit of the doubt. She tucked her phone back into her pocket. "It was really nice meeting you, Simon."

"You too." He smiled and winked at her. "You might have to throw an anchor around this one to keep him on land, but it'll be worth it."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong, Simon. Not even an anchor would keep me out of the ocean. Luckily, Suzie understands. Don't you, Suzie?" He glanced over at her.

"Yes, I do. I would never keep him away." She patted his chest and smiled as she looked into his eyes.

"Good woman." Simon nodded and stared at them both for a moment then gestured to the dock. "I'd walk you down, but I've got to clean up. Have a good trip back."

"Thanks, Bud." Paul gave him a light shove on the shoulder then slipped his arm through Suzie's. As they walked back towards the boat Suzie considered mentioning her concerns, but it had been such a nice visit, she didn't want to add tension. She kept quiet for the ride back to the docks. When Paul cut off the engine he looked over at her.

“Okay, what is it?”

“What?” She smiled.

“You are never this quiet.”

“Don’t be silly, I’m quiet all of the time.”

“No, you certainly aren’t. Especially when you’re investigating something.”

“Okay, okay. I am a bit more quiet than usual.”

“So? What is it?” He met her eyes.

“It’s just Simon.”

“Simon? What about him?”

“Did you notice anything off about him?”

“No, not really. Did you?”

“I’m not sure. Something about the way he talked to me, warning me to stay out of other people’s business, really left me flustered.”

“Oh, Simon can be that way.” Paul frowned. “I’m sorry I didn’t notice that. But he can be a bit harsh.”

“Do you think he knows something about what happened to Robbie?”

“If he did, he would tell me.” Paul narrowed his eyes. “He would want Robbie’s murderer brought to justice.”

“Are you sure? I mean, it looks like Robbie was up to some things that you didn’t know about. Maybe Simon is hiding things, too.”

“Suzie, I respect your instincts, I truly do, but just because Simon is a little rough around the edges, that doesn’t mean that he had anything to do with Robbie’s death.”

“I know that, you’re right. I just think it was a little odd the way he spoke about some things.”

“Today is the first time that you met him, so I can understand that. His type of charm is something that has to grow on you.”

“I understand, I guess I’m a little paranoid. Hopefully we can find something out about the people at the pearl farm. If so we might be able to get to the bottom of things.”

“I want to check in with some of Robbie’s friends. Some of his family is also supposed to be coming into town.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Suzie met his eyes.

“No, thanks. I just want to make sure they have everything they need.”

“I’ll go and update Jason.”

“Good idea.” He glanced over at her. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I am. Why?”

“The gun thing.” He frowned.

“No, I’m fine. You were there with me, right?”

He smiled. “That I was.”

“Then I’m fine.” She kissed his cheek.

“Do you want a lift?”

“No thank you, I could use the walk.” Suzie smiled. “Let me know if the family needs anything.”

“I will.” As Suzie walked away she tried to convince herself that he was right. Simon had nothing to do with what had happened to Robbie and had no information to offer. Her instincts were off. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was right.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12

By the time Suzie reached the police station she'd already decided to tell Jason about Simon. When she walked up to Jason's desk he had his phone trapped between his ear and his shoulder. She noticed the way his brow furrowed, and the ripple of his jaw. His shoulders were hunched over and his skin was pale.

"Do whatever it takes, and just get it done." He frowned as he hung up the phone and ran his hands across his face.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes I'm fine, just busy."

"Let me know if you need help with anything."

"All right, what can I do for you?"

"Paul and I took a ride around today to the places that Robbie last went to just to see if there was anything interesting out there."

"Why doesn't that surprise me? I had second thoughts about giving Paul a copy of the coordinates. I hope you didn't antagonize anyone or jeopardize the investigation?"

"No of course not, but there were a couple of things of concern. One, at one of the places Robbie went to we found a man in a yellow jacket that has a bald head. He matches the description of someone that was seen hanging around Robbie's boat on the day he was murdered. Apparently, he was repairing Robbie's boat."

"Yes, I know, I spoke with him just before."

"And you have the jacket I brought in last night?"

"Yes. I'm going with the idea that someone else in a yellow jacket was the one who actually killed Robbie. But I'm not sure of that yet. It's possible that Gill bought another jacket to replace the one he damaged. Or the murderer deliberately tried to frame Gill by planting a yellow jacket."

"That would make sense. But maybe there would be a paper trail

that we could follow to see if Gill purchased it recently?"

"Maybe, but if he bought it with cash it won't be likely. And it would be quite a difficult trail to follow. I plan to ask him for a DNA sample and we can compare that to what we find on the jacket."

"What about the blood? Is it Robbie's?"

"That hasn't been confirmed yet, but at the moment I'm assuming it is."

"Have you spoken to the people at the pearl farm?"

"Oh yes, that's another can of worms. I made some inquires with the police department where the family that owns the pearl farm used to live. Apparently Cecily Wren, the owner of the farm, has a long history of run-ins with the law. She's even been arrested for breaking and entering before. Her son, Junior, is no better. He's had some assault charges brought against him."

"Not surprising, since he pulled a gun on us."

"What?" His eyes widened.

"Don't worry about it, we handled it. Apparently they've had some thefts at their farm and he assumed we might be involved."

"Hm. They haven't reported any here. Someone is stealing from criminals. Good to know."

"Easy Jason, they could be turning their lives around. You never know."

"Sure, you're right." He sighed. "Did you discover anything else?"

"Well, we went to the last place on the GPS and it turned out to be a friend of both Paul's and Robbie's. His name is Simon."

"Right, I know him and I've spoken to him and there doesn't seem to be any reason to suspect him. Paul also told me that he wouldn't be an issue."

"I know that Paul feels that way, but I have to wonder."

"Why do you have to wonder?" Jason leaned forward some and looked into her eyes. "Your instincts are usually on target, Suzie, let me know what you're thinking."

"It's just that Simon claimed not to have seen Robbie. Then he gave me this look, and a warning about sticking my nose in other people's business."

"He threatened you?"

"No, I couldn't exactly say that. But I did feel like it was a threat. Just the way he said it, and the way he looked at me, made

me think that he was warning me not to get into his business."

"It's not unusual for fishermen to behave like that. They like their privacy."

"You're right. Still, I think it might be best to confirm his whereabouts. Paul also mentioned something about Robbie having a crush on a girl and thought that maybe she was from the pearl farm. Paul and Simon couldn't remember her name, but said she was quite young and her name was a month. You know like May or…."

"That might be Cecily's niece, April. She's on the list of employees. I guess that might be why Robbie went out to the farm."

"Maybe." Suzie nodded. "I know it's not much to go on, but it's a start."

"Suzie, I know telling you to stay out of this is useless, but please be careful."

"I will be, don't worry," Suzie said. "Don't forget, Jason, you're getting married. Make sure you write your vows."

"I'm working on it, I'm working on it." He yawned.

"Good." Suzie stood up from her chair, then paused. "I know it's not my place, but I overheard you arguing with Summer last night."

"You did?" His cheeks grew red. "I figured that was why you didn't give me the jacket."

"I just want you to know, it's normal to fight. Fighting means you care enough to struggle. If you're not fighting, that's when you should worry."

"You know this from your vast experience?"

"Okay, you've got me there. But I know how much you two love each other, and I don't want you to get discouraged."

"Thanks Suzie." He smiled, but the expression faded quickly. "I'll check into Simon and see if I come up with anything. In the meantime I'm running down a few leads from the docks. I'll be honest though, something is missing here. Normally there would be a thread, a piece of evidence that points me in the right direction. I just don't feel like I have that yet."

"Hopefully something will turn up soon."

"Hopefully."

"I'll let you know if I hear anything new."

"Thanks Suzie." He picked up his phone again and began to dial a number. Suzie left the station and walked towards Main Street. The events of the day tumbled through her mind. Due to her

investigative mind if she encountered anything that she didn't have a base knowledge of, it hung in her mind until she learned more about it. She knew nothing about pearls, or pearl farms, or what anyone would do with stolen pearls. If she had questions, she thought the best place to go would be the jewelry shop. But before she headed there she decided to get a bottle of water. Her throat was dry from being out in the sea air. She stepped into the convenience store and grabbed a bottle out of one of the coolers. She pulled out her phone and dialed Mary's number.

"Hi Mary."

"Suzie? How is everything?"

"Okay. I'm just going to the jewelry shop in town, I have a couple of questions to ask Nina."

"Oh good, I'll meet you there. I need to speak to her about the rings."

"The wedding rings?" Suzie paused a few feet from the register. "Is there a problem?"

"No problem. Jason wants to add an inscription to the rings, but he's very busy on the case, so he asked if I could stop in."

"Okay, see you soon." Suzie hung up the phone and set the bottle down on the counter. She smiled at the woman behind the counter, Suzie knew her from the convenience store but she didn't know her name.

"Looks like you've been out on the boat all day."

"Oh?" Suzie reached up to touch her hair, but the woman shook her head.

"You've got some sunburn. Might want to get some aloe on that."

Suzie touched her cheek and felt the heat against her fingertips. There was no question that she had sunburn. She grimaced at the thought. "Thanks for the warning." She was about to walk away when she hesitated. "Did you hear about the fisherman that was killed on his boat?"

"Yes." She lowered her eyes and shook her head. "Just awful."

"Yes, it is."

"I had just seen him that day. He came in here."

"Really. Did you notice anything strange?"

"It was early in the morning so I was rushing around getting the coffee pots ready. He and his friend waited for me to have a pot ready." She frowned. "It's so odd that a person can be right in front

of you one day and then gone."

"Yes it is. You mentioned he was with a friend. Did you know who the friend was? A woman?"

"No, a man. Uh, what's his name?" She narrowed her eyes. "He's hard to forget but his name, I just can't think of it right now."

"How come he was hard to forget?"

"Kind of loud. A burly guy you know. Oh that's it, Simon." She nodded. "That's his name."

"Simon?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure it was the day Robbie died?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I gave them the first cups of coffee out of the pot. They seemed tense and I wanted to get them out of the store."

"Tense how?"

"They kept talking real low, but the tone was hard, you know, angry." She frowned. "I don't know. I didn't hear anything specific."

"Okay, thanks for the info."

"Sure, I hope they figure out who did it."

Suzie picked up her water and headed out the door. As she did she dialed Jason's number. The phone rang several times, but he didn't answer. She hung up and tried Paul's number. He didn't pick up, either. She shoved her phone back into her pocket and sighed. If Simon was in the store with Robbie, why did he claim that he hadn't seen Robbie? It was clear to her that Simon had lied to her, and after the way he had looked at her, she was sure that he was trying to hide something. As her mind still swirled she made her way towards the jewelry store.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

A friend of Summer's worked at the jewelry store. Maybe she would be willing to give Suzie a quick tutorial about pearls. Suzie pulled open the door to the jewelry store and stepped inside. The carpet was plush and the lights were bright. A woman waved to her as she walked towards one of the glass display cases.

"Hi Suzie."

"Hi Nina. I wonder if I could have a minute of your time."

"Sure, just give me a couple of minutes I have some paperwork to fill out, then I'll be all yours."

"Thanks." Suzie nodded at her. She had met Nina a few times, but didn't know her very well. Suzie looked into the display cases while she waited. A large display of pearl jewelry held her attention. She didn't think it was too unusual, but the fact that she had just been to a pearl farm for the first time made the jewelry stand out to her. She'd never been much of a fan of pearls, but she found herself admiring them just a little more. The door to the jewelry shop opened and Suzie turned to see Mary step inside.

"Hi Mary." Suzie smiled and gestured for Mary to join her. "Have you seen this collection?"

"No, I haven't." Mary peered through the glass. "It's beautiful. The one gift Kent gave me that I truly treasured was a pearl pendant. I don't know why, but they always made me feel so refined."

"I've never seen you wear pearls." Suzie raised an eyebrow.

"I never had much of a reason to be refined. I left it with him when I moved away. It might have been beautiful, but it was still a reminder I didn't need."

"I understand." Suzie looked back at the display. "I was at a pearl farm today and they mentioned some recent thefts. I thought

perhaps Nina could tell me a little bit about the pearls."

"I sure can." Nina paused behind the display. "These came from the Atlantic."

"You know where they come from?" Suzie looked up at her.

"Absolutely. We're always very careful who we purchase the pearls from. Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Yes. Did you know there's a farm in the area, close to Parish?"

"Oh yes, I just recently heard about them."

"You didn't purchase any pearls from them?"

"No. We only deal with large, reputable farms. It's too hard to tell whether small farms are using legal, ethical and safe practices when harvesting their pearls and we don't want to support anything that our customers wouldn't be happy with."

"That's a good thing. So, no one tried to sell your shop any pearls?"

"It's not uncommon for some of the local fishermen to try to sell pearls that they've happened to come across if the pawn shop won't take them. I mean Frank and Pedro have been in here a few times as well as some others that I don't know the names of. There seems to be quite a few pearls around lately. However, there was a man in here the other day that tried to sell me a larger amount than usual. I've seen him before, but I don't know his name and I turned him away. When I asked him about them he couldn't give me a clear explanation of where they came from."

"Interesting. I wonder if they might have been stolen from the pearl farm. They've had several thefts lately."

"Hm. Maybe. I had no reason to believe they were stolen otherwise I would have let Jason know."

"You said it was a man?" Suzie pulled her phone out of her pocket. "Was it this man?" She showed her a picture of Gill Smith from his website.

"No. That's not him."

"How about this man?" She scrolled to a picture of Mike that she had secretly taken.

"No, sorry, not him either."

As Suzie began scrolling through pictures to get to a photograph she'd managed to get from the internet of Robbie, Nina gasped. "That's him right there!" She pointed at a picture from earlier that day of Paul with his arm around her and Simon just beside him.

"Paul?" Mary blurted out. "That can't be right."

“No, not Paul. Him.” She pointed directly at Simon. “He was the one that tried to sell me the pearls.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. I could pull the footage from the security cameras, but I’m afraid you won’t be able to see much. He only showed me the pearls briefly before I asked him to leave. I don’t think the cameras caught it. But they will show him.”

“Thank you so much. I’ll see if Jason wants to send an officer over to collect the footage.”

“Sure, any time.”

“Speaking of Jason.” Mary stepped forward. “He would like this inscription added to the wedding rings.” She handed Nina a slip of paper. “Is it too late to do that?”

“Not for Summer and Jason.” Nina smiled. “I’ll make sure that it gets done right away.”

“Thanks.” Mary sighed with relief. “At least one thing is going right.”

“What is going wrong?” Suzie stepped out the door behind Mary.

“A few of the flights were delayed for some of Summer’s family members and a couple of friends and so I’ve had to rearrange the pick-ups. Not to mention that the fresh linens aren’t on the beds yet and I haven’t made it to the grocery store to pick up the extra supplies…”

“Oh Mary, I got so caught up in all of this I’ve been leaving everything on your shoulders. I’m sorry for that. I’ll take care of the linens as soon as we get home and once that is done I’ll go to the store. You just focus on the guests coming in and if you need any help with making the arrangements let me know.”

“Suzie, you don’t have anything to apologize for, what you’re doing is very important. If the murder is solved then at least Summer and Jason can relax at the wedding. With the tension at the moment I’m worried that there won’t even be a wedding.”

“Don’t talk like that.” Suzie wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “There is going to be a wedding, even if I have to tie the two of them down to make it happen.”

“Hm, I’m pretty sure that’s illegal.”

“Someone has to arrest me, and since Jason will be tied up, who’s left?”

Mary laughed and shook her head. “You always know how to

lighten my mood, Suzie. But I hope you're right, Jason and Summer deserve a wedding without any problems."

"Has a wedding like that ever happened?"

"If not, then I'm determined to make this one the first."

"If you're determined, Mary, then I have no doubt that it will happen."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

Suzie shook out the sheet and spread it across the bed. The scent of the laundry soap and the subtle breeze created by the movement brought a smile to her lips. As she tucked in the corners her cell phone began to ring. She rushed over to it and picked it up.

"Paul, I've been trying to reach you."

"I know you have, I'm sorry, Suzie. I got caught up with Robbie's sister and it just didn't seem right to excuse myself for a phone call. Is everything okay?"

"I'm not sure. I know you think that Simon had nothing to do with this, but he lied to us."

"What do you mean?"

"He said he hadn't seen Robbie, but the clerk at the convenience store told me that he was in there with Robbie the day he died."

"Maybe she was mistaken?"

"No, she was pretty broken up about the fact that she was one of the last people to see him alive. She was certain it was that morning and that it was Simon."

"It's possible that Simon just overlooked it. Maybe it was just a chance meeting."

"Maybe. But then Nina at the jewelry store said that he tried to sell her some pearls. Quite a large amount, apparently."

"What? Why would Simon have pearls? He doesn't deal in pearls."

"I have no…" Suzie said then stopped and her eyes widened. "Wait a minute, I think I know."

"You do?"

"Yep. The girl that Robbie liked, she does work at the pearl farm. Her name is April, according to Jason. Maybe she gave Robbie and Simon some pearls. Maybe she's behind this and she's

stealing the pearls for them."

"You could be onto something. I find it hard to believe that Simon or Robbie would be involved in this, but maybe April was involved somehow."

"The family does have an extensive criminal history."

"I think we should look into it more," Paul said.

"Good idea. I have to do some shopping and then if you want we could try going out to the pearl farm again."

"Do you really think that's a good idea? After what happened out there earlier? It's not as if they're going to be willing to talk to us."

"That's true. I wonder if we can find another way to get to April. Let me do some checking while I'm in town. Does Robbie's family have any idea who might be behind this?"

"No, not that they told me. How is everything going with the wedding plans?"

"It's coming together."

"Good, let me know when you want to meet up."

"I will." Suzie hung up the phone and finished making the beds. As she worked one by one through the rooms to make sure that each one was in order she wondered if the footage from the jewelry store would be good enough to identify Simon. If it wasn't then it might come down to eye witness identification. Would Paul believe it? She thought he was making excuses for a friend who might not have been much of a friend after all. She did one last check in the kitchen to be sure that everything on the grocery list was all that they needed. As she headed for the door Mary rushed towards her.

"Suzie, I'm so glad that I caught you. I need a few more things from the store. Some of the guests have made some requests and after being delayed and all the trouble at the airport I want to accommodate them as much as possible."

"I agree, just let me know what you need."

"Here, I made another little list." She handed it to her and took a deep breath. "I think we're just about ready."

"Wonderful. I'll have the groceries back here in no time." Suzie left Dune House with a sense of urgency. With the guests arriving and the wedding day drawing closer, it seemed as if everything was closing in.

As she pulled into the parking lot of the grocery store she was so distracted that she almost drove into a stray cart. She hit the brakes

hard and stared as it rolled by pushed by the wind. It wasn't the sight of the cart that startled her as much as it was her lack of attention. Shaken, she parked the car and walked into the store. She focused on the list of items and made sure she didn't forget anything. When she joined the line to the only open register her cell phone rang. She saw that it was Jason, and since the line was so long she decided to answer it.

"Jason, did you find out anything new?"

"Not much on Simon, he's a pretty private person. Is Paul with you by any chance?"

"No."

"Oh, I tried to get hold of him, but I couldn't. Summer did let me know that Robbie was most likely not killed with a weapon, it was more likely a tool."

"Like a screwdriver?"

"Something like that only short, flat, pointy at the tip but then it gets wider. It's hard to describe exactly. She hasn't been able to find a weapon that matches it, so her best guess is that it's a tool of some kind. That's why I was hoping Paul was with you to ask him if he knows of any tools used on a boat that matches that description."

"Hm. Interesting. I was speaking to him just before, so maybe that's why you couldn't get through." She moved forward a few steps in line. She filled him in on what she had found out at the jewelry store explaining that she had been there to meet Mary and just used the opportunity to ask about the pearls so he wouldn't think she was meddling too much. "Paul and I think that April might be involved in all of this."

"Really? She's the only one from the farm with a clean record. But I was going to get all of them in from the farm for further questioning, anyway. She's the first one on the list and she should be here in around an hour."

"Oh, okay. If she hasn't been in trouble with the law before, she might be more talkative."

"Good point. Someone is going out shortly to pick her up."

"Let me know how you go."

"I will."

Suzie hung up and pushed her cart forward in line again. She glanced at the other registers that were closed. Unless there was a big event the grocery store rarely had more than one register open.

Still, she could hope. As she waited bits of conversation drifted to her ears.

"Robbie knew better. He shouldn't have gotten mixed up in all of that."

"You don't know that for sure. Just because there are rumors doesn't make them true."

"Rumors maybe, but he was flaunting the cash. You saw his new boat, and the way he flashed money around town. It's not like he was trying to hide it."

Suzie didn't realize that she had leaned too heavily against the cart until she felt it bounce against the woman's ankle in front of her.

"Ouch!"

"I'm so sorry!" Suzie drew the cart back.

"Oh, Suzie right?" The woman smiled at her. "I bet you're getting all set for the wedding, huh?"

"Busy, busy." Suzie nodded. "It's an exciting time."

"Yes, it is. Make sure you wish Jason and Summer well from Judy."

"Are you a friend of theirs?"

"Not really, but their romance is the talk of the town."

"Among other things?" Suzie raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry I just couldn't help but overhear what you said about Robbie."

"How embarrassing. I don't usually gossip. But it's such a sad story."

"Did you know Robbie?"

"Sure, we went to high school together. We'd say hello to each other when we saw each other in town, but nothing more than that."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. I just wish he'd been more careful."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, clearly he was involved in something criminal. He started making big purchases, had a lot of money in his pocket. He didn't come right out and say it, but he might as well have."

"Maybe he just had a good run?"

"Not that good. Like I said, I grew up around here, and no fisherman no matter how good the run, has that kind of cash. You know a lot of the boats run drugs, things like that."

"A lot of them?" Suzie raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure about

that?"

"Okay, that might be a bit of an exaggeration. But if you ask most of the guys that work on the boats they have stories about the illegal activity that could make them a mint."

"Stories." Suzie frowned. "Do you think they're anything more than that?"

"It's hard to say. But I can tell you the only person I've seen with that kind of money over the past few years is Robbie. It doesn't come from the ocean. Good luck with the wedding." She rolled her cart away from the register.

Suzie paid for her items and then pushed the cart out to the car. The more she heard about Robbie's recent behavior the more she suspected the same thing that some other people did. If Robbie had some kind of windfall his family would know about it. She called Paul as she loaded the groceries into the car.

"Paul, did any of Robbie's family members mention him having some kind of windfall lately?"

"Windfall? No. They were worried about the debt they might have to deal with from the boat and dock fees."

"Paul, it sounds like Robbie was making money somewhere, and more than likely not legally."

"What are you thinking?"

"Maybe the pearl farm was on his GPS tracker because he was stealing from them."

"I hate to think that."

"Me too, but I think we have good reason to suspect him."

"It's hard for me to believe that my friend could have been involved in these things without me knowing it."

"Maybe you missed it. If people want to hide something they usually can."

"Maybe I did miss it." He sighed. "Maybe if I was around more."

"No, Paul, you can't think like that. If Robbie got himself wrapped up in something it was because of his choice, there's nothing that you could have done."

"I can do something now though. Get to the bottom of this."

"Jason is going to interview the girl from the pearl farm that Robbie might have been seeing. I might accidently bump into her while she's at the police station."

"Accidently." He laughed. "Okay, I'll wait to hear from you."

Suzie hung up the phone and started to open her car door.

Before she could grasp the handle a heavy force drove her forward to the alley beside the grocery store. She panicked as the large figure behind her continued to propel her.

"Suzie, I need to talk to you." Mike's gruff voice filled her senses.

"Get off of me, Mike!" She shoved back at him. "What are you thinking?"

"The cops are all over me, asking questions, inspecting my boat. I didn't do this!"

She stared hard at Mike. "If you really want me to believe that you had nothing to do with this then you should stop doing things like this. This tough guy act isn't convincing me of anything but your bad judgment."

"It's not an act!" Mike growled.

"All you're doing is driving yourself even deeper into suspicion. Is that what you want? To get locked up?"

"No, it's not."

"Well, that's where you will be, Mike, you shoved me down here in this alley like some brute and if I wanted to I could have you in handcuffs by now. So why do you think I should believe you?"

Mike growled and ran his hands across his face. "I just want one person to believe me. I had nothing to do with this. My whole livelihood is dependent on that boat. I've never done anything wrong. If the police take it, what will I have?"

Suzie sighed and shook her head. "Stop Mike, just stop. The police are investigating the case. It's going to get sorted out."

"Right, with me as the fall guy."

"Not unless you paint a target on your back." She frowned. "I believe you. Okay? I don't think you had anything to do with this." Suzie wanted to placate the man and although her gut told her that he wasn't involved she still suspected him and she didn't want him to know that.

"Thank you. That's all I want."

"Great. Can I go now?" She peered past him at the car.

"Yes. You'll tell Jason?"

"That you practically kidnapped and assaulted me?" She raised an eyebrow.

"No! That's not what I meant."

"I know that, Mike. But you need to lay low. Don't do anything stupid. This will all be settled soon."

“Thank you, Suzie.”

She nodded and stepped around him. Despite the fact that the confrontation was over, her heart still raced so fast that it was hard to breathe. She hurried back to her car. For a moment she considered a phone call to Jason to tell him what had happened. But she didn’t want to bother him.

Suzie took a deep breath and then focused on the drive back to Dune House. She dropped off the groceries, shouted a greeting and goodbye to Mary then headed back to the car. She drove straight to the station. She hoped that maybe she would be able to catch April on her way out and ask her a few questions. Maybe she would be able to get more information out of her than the police could.

When she stepped inside there was a small crowd at the front desk. She edged her way around it and was greeted by a patrolman at the entrance of the hall that led to the interrogation rooms.

“Hello there, Suzie.”

“Hi.” She smiled. “Just dropping by to visit Jason.”

“Uh huh, and I’m just here to make sure you don’t interrupt any conversations. At Jason’s request.”

“Really? He sent muscle?”

“Looks like his instincts were right.”

“I was just checking in.” She shrugged.

“Just do me a favor and stay out here in reception, hm?” He met her eyes.

“Yes, of course.” She retreated a few steps towards the seating area. When he walked away a door opened and she noticed a beautiful, young woman who stepped out of it. She guessed that it was April. Jason stepped out behind her. Suzie started to smile at Jason but his serious expression stopped her. The girl that walked towards her looked fragile and young. It was hard for her not to want to comfort her. April brushed past her towards the door. Jason paused beside Suzie and spoke in a low tone.

“I didn’t get much out of her. I have no reason to hold her. About the only thing she admitted was knowing Robbie. That’s not a reason to arrest her.”

“Can’t you question her more?”

“Not without cause, Suzie. I did the best I could.”

“I know you did, Jason.”

As Suzie turned away from him she noticed the door as it swung shut behind April. This was her turn to give it a shot. She hurried

after her and caught up with her on the sidewalk in front of the police station.

"April! Wait!"

April turned back and brushed her blonde hair away from her face. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to ask you a quick question."

"Are you a police officer?"

"No, I'm not. Just curious."

"Curious about what?"

"Did you know Robbie?"

"Look, I said all I was going to say. I have nothing more to add. I don't know why you are harassing me."

"I don't mean to harass you, really I don't. It's just that I have a few questions and it would be so much easier if you answered them. It would be better than your family being questioned about your involvement with Robbie and the thefts at the farm."

April froze and shoved her hands into the pockets of her light jacket. She looked straight at Suzie. "Why are you asking me these questions?"

"April, I just want to help you."

"By threatening to get me in trouble with my family?"

"It's not like that. You're young. There's no way you were the mastermind of all of this. I just want to give you the chance to come clean and maybe not get in as much trouble with the law."

Her lower lip trembled as she closed her eyes. "None of this was supposed to happen."

"What do you mean? What did Robbie get you into?"

"No, it wasn't like that."

"It wasn't? Just tell me the truth, April. We can try to sort it all out."

"Robbie had nothing to do with it."

"What do you mean he had nothing to do with it? He was murdered over it, he had to be involved somehow."

"Not exactly. Look, I don't want to say too much. But Robbie, he was never supposed to get in the middle of any of this."

"Tell me what happened, April."

April pulled her hands out of her pockets and brushed her hands across her face. Suzie noticed some cuts on the skin of her hands.

"Shucking," April said when she noticed that Suzie was looking at them. April curled them into fists to show off the marks. "It's

what I do. I shuck the oysters. That's it. All day long. The smell is disgusting. I can't stand it."

"So why do you stay?"

"I have no choice." She sighed. "I'm part of the family. It's the family business."

"Did Robbie have a choice?"

"Robbie was innocent in all of this. I'm not saying anything else."

"If Robbie wasn't involved then where did he get all of the money from?"

April cringed. "He wasn't involved. He never should have been involved."

"So, you were?" Suzie stared at her. "Were you stealing from your family?"

"It wasn't like that." April closed her eyes and shook her head. "I'm not saying anything else."

"How can I help you if you won't tell me the truth?"

"I can't." She stared up into her eyes. "Don't you see? If I say anything, I'm going to be next. Robbie didn't deserve what happened to him, but I can't do anything about it, he's gone. Now all I can do is worry about protecting myself. I don't have anything else to say."

"If you don't answer the questions the police will have to ask everyone at the farm."

"Then the next time you see me I'll be on a slab." She shrugged. "Not that it should matter to you."

"It matters to me. If you tell me the truth, I can try to find a way to protect you. I can ask Jason to."

"Tell that to Robbie." She rolled her eyes and skirted past Suzie to the street. "Do what you have to do."

Suzie sighed and stared after her.

"How did I know you wouldn't stay out of this?" Jason's voice carried from just behind her.

"Did you hear all of that?"

"Some."

"Do you think she's telling the truth?"

"I think she's hiding everything."

"But is she hiding it out of fear? Jason, she's so young. What if she gets killed in all of this?"

"Suzie, she's lying to me. There's nothing I can do about it. I'm

going to head over to the farm and see what I can find out."

"Wait, Jason. Can you wait until morning?"

"Why would I do that?" He shook his head. "This isn't something I can drag my feet on."

"She seemed scared to me, Jason. She didn't want Robbie to die, something is way off about all of this. I think you should wait a bit before you do anything. At least wait until morning, see if there's any new developments before then."

He sighed and rubbed a hand across his forehead. "It's one day until the wedding, Suzie. It would be much better if I could wrap this up today."

"I know that, Jason, I do. But will you feel like getting married if April shows up dead?"

He frowned. "No. Of course not."

"Then let me follow my instincts."

"What are they telling you?"

"I'm not completely sure, yet. I just want to think this through properly first."

"Okay, but be careful, Suzie. If Robbie really didn't have anything to do with this, then we're dealing with some ruthless killers here."

"I won't do anything. I just want to run it through in my head and it will give you more time to work it out without putting April at risk."

"Okay." He nodded.

"By the way, some of Summer's family are getting in tonight. You should come to Dune House for dinner."

"I don't know, I'm busy with the case."

"Jason. They are going to be your in-laws. It's the respectful thing to do."

Jason laughed and looked over at her. "Are you mothering me?"

"I wouldn't know. But you should have dinner with Summer's family. Right now it might not seem like a big deal, but the impression you leave on them will last."

"Fine. I'll go to dinner." He pointed a finger at her. "Don't do anything stupid, it's just time to try to work this out."

"I won't." She smiled. On the way to the car she called Paul. "Meet me at the docks. I have a plan."

"I'll be there in five minutes."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15

Suzie arrived at the docks just as Paul stepped off his boat.

"Hey, you all right?" He looked into her eyes.

"Why?'

"You look a little shaken."

Suzie smiled at the thought that he could read her so easily. "I'm okay. I want to talk to you about something."

He gestured to a bench beside a low wall that lined the entrance of the dock. "What is it?"

"I think Simon had something to do with this."

"Ah, Suzie, you don't know that."

"No, I don't. But I think that either Robbie or Simon were involved in the thefts from the pearl farm. Or maybe both." She met his eyes. "Do you want to know the truth or do you want to save their reputations?"

"That's not fair, Suzie. Of course I want to know the truth. But I don't want to make unfounded accusations either."

"Paul, please. I know you don't want to believe that Simon could be involved in all of this, but Nina pointed him out in a photograph and identified him as someone who tried to sell her pearls and that wasn't the only time he was in there. What business would Simon have in a jewelry shop? He doesn't seem the type to browse the latest charms and ring settings. So, why was he there?"

"Suzie." He frowned and leaned back against the wall. "It's just that I've known Simon for a long time."

"I know you have, and I know that you don't want to believe that he had anything to do with any of this. But at some point you have to ask yourself whether you are just not facing the truth."

He looked up at her sharply, but the expression faded the moment he met her eyes. "I know you're right." He shook his head.

“I just wish that you weren’t.”

“It’s better to know the truth, don’t you think, Paul? If we at least find out what really happened to Robbie then you can have some answers for his family. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Of course it is. You know better than to question that. But, you’re asking me to believe that Simon might have had something to do with Robbie’s death. We were all friends.”

“You thought you were.”

“And if we’re wrong? If Simon has nothing to do with any of this? Then I’ve lost two friends.”

“I know that’s a risk, but it’s not as if we don’t have reason to suspect him. He’s given us plenty…” She paused and looked into his eyes. “Simon looked me in the eye and threatened me, while you sat right there next to me. That is what I believe. That is what all of the evidence is pointing to.”

“Maybe you see it that way, but I need more. I do trust you, Suzie, I do. But I know Simon, and the thought of him hurting Robbie just blows my mind. I need some actual proof that I can’t argue with.”

“So, let’s get it.” She folded her arms across her chest. “The best way to find out for sure is to follow him.”

“Follow him?”

“Yes. Let’s track him. Let’s see what he does when no one else is looking. I’m not going to ask you to risk your friendship if I can’t prove it to you. So, let’s find that proof, one way or the other.”

“When do you want to plant a tracker on his boat?”

“Do you have one?”

Paul pursed his lips. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys. “Yes. I do.”

“Should I ask why?”

“I picked it up earlier today.”

Suzie’s eyes widened as she waited for further explanation. He sighed and shook his head.

“Maybe I had the same idea you did.”

“Seriously?”

“I got it just in case. I thought maybe, if Simon kept acting strange, I’d just see for myself.”

“But you weren’t going to tell me?”

“It’s not because I don’t trust you, Suzie. It’s because I was trying to be loyal to a friend. But, now I see it’s better that we do this

together. I'll go grab it."

Suzie watched him hurry off to his car. As she waited for him to return it occurred to her that he had a strong moral code. Even though he suspected his friend, he still did his best to protect him, that was something that she admired.

When he returned, his eyes met hers. "What?"

"Hm?"

"You're smiling."

"Oh, just thinking how lucky I am to be with you."

He shook his head with a short laugh. "Let's get this figured out."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16

As Suzie and Paul set off on the boat Suzie kept her attention on the water. It wasn't long before they arrived at Simon's place. His boat was docked, the house up the hill had lights on.

"I think he's home. It'll only take me a second to get this in position. If you see Simon coming, duck down, don't let him know you're here."

"I'll just warn you."

"No." His tone grew firm. "Don't let him know that you're there, if he spots you, this could turn ugly."

"Okay. But you have to be careful, too."

"I can come up with a good explanation for why I'm on the boat. Don't worry."

Suzie nodded, but she did worry, from the moment that he stepped onto the other boat she worried. As she waited for him to return she watched the hill that led up to the house. If there was any sign of Simon, she fully intended to warn Paul. However, he was back on the boat within minutes.

"Okay, it's done." His cheeks flushed.

"It was the right thing, Paul. If nothing comes of it, we'll get the tracker back, and Simon will never know."

"But I'll know." He frowned. Suzie ran her fingertips along the curve of his shoulder until he looked into her eyes.

"It's the right thing, Paul, I promise."

He nodded and eased the boat away from Simon's house. "Now we wait. If he moves, it'll alert us."

The sun began to set as the boat drifted through the water. The tracker remained silent. Suzie began to think that Paul might have been right. All the time she sat there on a quiet boat, in the middle of the ocean, she could be helping Mary with the guests. As a surge

of guilt flooded her, the tracker came alive.

"Here, he's on the move." Paul glanced at his watch. "Rather late, too."

"Can you follow him without being spotted?"

"Yes. I can keep a good distance and the tracker will still work. But let's keep it quiet, just in case."

Suzie nodded. Within a few minutes her heart sank. Just as she suspected Simon headed for the pearl farm. He had no reason to go there. He claimed he had no association with them. So why did he stop right at the dock?

"We need to get close, Paul."

"Why?"

"I have a bad feeling. We need to see what he's doing."

"Okay, just keep quiet and still." He turned off the lights on the boat and eased it to a stop not far from the dock. Suzie saw Simon step off his boat onto the dock. There was another figure there, short-statured and hidden by a hoodie. Her skin grew cold as she guessed that it was April. When Simon stepped onto the dock April shied back. His voice carried far enough for them to hear.

"I know you met with the cops today. What did you tell them?"

"Nothing. I didn't tell them anything. I don't even know how they knew to come to me. I don't even know who told them that I knew Robbie."

"Don't worry about that. What did you say to them?"

"Nothing! I wouldn't tell them anything. I can't believe this happened. How could you let this happen?"

"Keep quiet. You have no idea what you're talking about."

"I know that Robbie wasn't in on this!"

"You don't know anything. What happened to Robbie happened. Now, it can either get worse, or we can all walk away from this. So what is it going to be? Do I need to worry about what you might do?"

"No. You don't. I didn't say anything. I won't say anything. But this has to end. It's out of control."

"It's over. Okay?"

"Is it?" Her voice cracked. "I don't think it is."

"It will be. I'll take care of it."

"Is that what you told Robbie?"

"Quiet. Just keep quiet about that."

"Okay, I didn't say anything." She held up her hands and backed

away from him.

Simon walked back onto his boat and sped back towards his house. Paul leaned on the railing and closed his eyes.

"I can't believe it. But I have no other choice."

"We don't know everything yet, Paul. But we do know that he was involved, and so was April."

"I need to talk to Simon."

"Paul, no. That's a very bad idea."

"I need to." He looked over at her. "I owe him a face to face conversation."

"No, you don't owe him anything. He's not the man that you thought he was, Paul. Please, let's just go back to the docks."

"You're right." He nodded. "Let's go."

Their ride back to the docks was quiet. Suzie glanced over at him a few times, but his stoic expression made her think that he wasn't up for talking. It didn't seem appropriate for her to say anything. She just lingered close to him and took his hand when she could. When they were close enough Suzie called Jason. There was a lot of noise in the background.

"Hey Suzie, I'm at dinner, like you told me to be."

"Good, that's good. Do you think you can send someone to pick up Simon? We found him at the pearl farm and saw him get into a confrontation with April."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Did he actually put his hands on her?"

"No. But he warned her not to talk to the police."

"I'm not sure that we have enough to pick him up. But we might be able to get a search warrant. Not likely until morning."

"Get it as soon as you can. I'm afraid he might take off. He knows that you spoke to April, so he's spooked."

"All right, I'll see what I can do. But even if we get the warrant that doesn't necessarily mean that we'll find anything," Jason said. "I should have known that you wouldn't stay out of this." He hung up before she could reply.

Paul docked the boat. "I'll catch up with you later."

"Okay, I'm just a phone call away if you want company," Suzie said as she climbed off the boat.

Paul leaned close to kiss her, then turned to the cabin. Suzie hesitated. She wondered if she should try to stay with him. But

Mary had so much on her shoulders with all of the guests that she knew she needed to get back to Dune House.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17

By the time Suzie arrived at Dune House, Jason and Summer had already left. Mary was elbow deep in a sink full of dishes.

“Here, let me take over.” Suzie stepped up behind her.

“Oh, thank you.” Mary yawned. “I could use a sit down.” She sat down on one of the kitchen chairs and plopped her feet down on the other.

“How did the dinner go?”

“Fantastic. Everyone got along well, and Summer was so pleased that Jason was here.”

“I’m glad he was, too.”

“Now, what about you? Jason mentioned something about you going off on an adventure and never listening.”

“Something like that.” Suzie frowned as she ran a sponge across a plate. “Paul and I followed Simon.”

“You did? What did you find out?”

“I’m pretty sure he was involved in the thefts at the pearl farm and maybe even Robbie’s death.”

“Wow. How did Paul take it?”

“It’s hard to say with Paul. Sometimes he’s hard to read. I know that it’s bothering him.”

“Is Jason arresting Simon?”

“Not yet, he said that he wouldn’t even be able to get a search warrant until morning.”

“Ugh, that is cutting it close to the wedding.”

“I know, but it’s procedure.” Suzie frowned. “I just hope that Simon doesn’t take off before Jason has a chance to arrest him. It would have been so nice if all of this was done and taken care of today.”

“Yes, it would. Too bad for Paul though.”

“It is. I think he’s starting to realize his friendship with Simon wasn’t what he thought it was.”

“Better to know, I suppose.”

“I just hope he doesn’t feel like I’m attacking him.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t. You have to trust him a little, to know your heart.”

“You’re right.” She finished the dishes and turned around to face her. “So, what’s on the agenda for the morning?”

“I’ve offered everyone breakfast, but they’ve made arrangements to have breakfast at that cute little café on the water. So it should be pretty quiet here in the morning.”

“Oh good, that will give us some time to go over what still needs to be done for the wedding.”

“Actually, we’re pretty good on that. The centerpieces are done, the decorations are ready to go up, I double-checked on the reservations for the chairs, and I double checked the new order of shellfish with the fisherman that Paul recommended.”

“Wonderful. You are amazing, Mary.”

“Really? I’m not the one solving a murder.”

“No, you’re the one pulling off the perfect wedding for two very busy people while your best friend, who you should be able to rely on, is off running around town.”

“Suzie, I know that I can always rely on you. Don’t ever think that I don’t.”

Suzie hugged her and smiled. “Ditto Mary. I guess we’d both better get some sleep and hope that everything goes smoothly over the next couple of days.”

“Good idea.” Mary stretched and yawned again. “I’ve got the calls forwarded to my room if any of the guests need anything.”

“Okay, if there’s any crisis, feel free to wake me up.”

“You’ll be the first to know.” Mary laughed and headed to her room.

Once Suzie was in bed she tried to sleep, but her mind was too revved up with what she saw that night. If Simon hurt Robbie, would he hurt April, too? The thought of the young woman being harmed made her restless. At some point she fell asleep because her cell phone woke her up early the next morning.

“Hello?” She mumbled into the phone.

“Suzie, it’s Jason. I got that search warrant, but there’s a problem.”

“What?”

“We went to Simon’s place and he isn’t there. It looks like he might have cleaned some things out so he can take off.”

“Oh no.” She sighed.

“I’ll update you if anything happens, but I just wanted you and Paul to be on the lookout.”

“Thanks for the heads up, Jason. I’ll let Paul know.”

She hung up the phone and dragged herself to her feet. It seemed to her that she hadn’t slept at all. She met Mary in the kitchen just as she set up a pot of coffee.

“Mm, perfect timing.” Suzie smiled. She called Paul’s number as she waited for the coffee to brew. Paul didn’t answer. She sent him a text. Again, he didn’t respond. Paul was always up earlier than her. If the sun was up Paul was up and often long before the sun was up, he was up. So, why wasn’t he answering? Her heart started to race. What if Simon confronted Paul? Or the other way around?

“Here Suzie.” Mary handed her a cup of coffee.

“No, no thank you. I have to go.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“I think Paul might be in trouble.”

“Then I’ll come with you. All of the guests are out and Summer is with them, I gave her a spare key in case she needed to organize something for the wedding and we weren’t available. I’ll call her on the way so she knows that they can call me if they need anything. We’ll go find Paul.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. Here, I’ll pop some coffee into a thermos. Then Paul can have some, too.”

Two minutes later they headed out the door towards the docks.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 18

As Suzie drove with Mary towards the docks her heart raced even faster. Nightmare scenarios played through her mind. Sure, she was overreacting, but for some reason she couldn't stop it. She parked and jumped out of the car. Suzie surveyed the boats at the dock. She looked twice before she admitted to herself that Paul's boat wasn't there.

"Mary, something's not right. Paul must have taken the boat out without telling me."

"Do you think he would do that?" Mary frowned. "Maybe he went to Simon himself?'

"Oh no, I hope not. If Paul goes to Simon and hints that he knows he was involved somehow, then he could be in grave danger. We have to go after him."

"But how? We can't just go out on a boat ourselves."

"No, we're going to need some help." Suzie looked over at Mike's boat. She noticed him near the edge of the boat. He tried hard to pretend that he wasn't looking at them. "Mike!" She strode towards him with as much confidence as she could muster. "I need your help."

"I don't want to be involved." He turned his back to her.

"Mike, please. Paul's life might be in danger. I'm sorry that we suspected you, but now I know that you weren't involved. But there's only one way to prove it. Right now you're still a suspect. You have no alibi, you have a history of conflict with Robbie. But we need to prove who did do it so you can stop being on the suspect list."

He sighed and turned back to face her. "How do I know this isn't some trick?"

"If I really thought that you were a murderer do you think I

would ask you to help me and my best friend? Do you think I would ever put her in that kind of danger?"

Mike looked past her to Mary, who stood a few feet behind Suzie. Mary held up a hand and waved a little. "I'm the best friend. Trust me, she is very overprotective."

He shook his head again. "Fine, you don't suspect me, but it sounds to me that you're trying to get yourself tangled up in something very dangerous, and that's not something I want to be involved in. Why would I put my life at risk, my boat at risk?"

"It's Paul, Mike. You two have been on these docks together for a long time."

"And maybe if he had listened to me from the beginning none of this would have happened. He wanted to believe that Robbie was so innocent, I tried to warn him to not get into someone else's business, but he didn't want to hear me. He also suspected me and I might not be the most liked fisherman around here, but I am trustworthy, and Paul should have known that."

Mary met his eyes. "Mike, he did. If you were in trouble you know that Paul would have helped you. Are you really going to put Paul's life at risk, all because you want to make a point?"

He frowned. "I try to follow a policy of staying out of business that has nothing to do with me. But you're right. I don't want the police to keep sniffing around me. Eventually they'll find something to pin on me. So I will take you out, but the first sign of trouble, we are turning back."

"Absolutely." Suzie smiled. "Thank you, Mike."

Mike clenched his jaw and reached his hand out to her to help her onto the boat. Then he reached out to Mary. As Suzie saw Mike grab hold of Mary's hand she wondered if she'd made the right choice.

"Are you sure you're okay to go out on the water?" Suzie asked Mary.

Mary nodded yes. She didn't like being on a boat nearly as much as Suzie, but she was getting used to them and she couldn't let Suzie go out there alone.

A jolt of fear shot through Suzie as the possibility that she was wrong about Mike played through her mind. But it was too late to change her mind. The engine roared and the boat lurched away from the dock.

Mary clung to the railing so tightly that her knuckles turned

white. She looked out over the water. Suzie moved into place right beside her. She scanned the horizon. Maybe she would spot Paul's boat. Maybe he hadn't gotten as much of a head start as they expected he did. However, the wide open ocean was empty. Not only was Paul's boat not there, she didn't see any other boats on the water either.

"So, where are we headed?" Mike looked over at her with a scowl. "I need to make this fast, I have other things to do."

"To Simon's place."

"Simon?" Mike raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because I think that's where Paul went. They're friends."

"So, why are we chasing him down there? He would be safe with Simon."

"Just go to Simon's place, please." Suzie met his eyes. Mike stared at her for a moment, then set his course. She guessed that he had more questions, but she didn't want to answer them. Until she knew for sure that her suspicions were true she didn't want to sully Simon's name. Was that even where Paul went? She didn't know. Above them the sky rumbled. Suzie looked at Mary and noticed how pale she was.

"We can't stay out here long. The storm is coming our way." Mike narrowed his eyes. "I'll take you to Paul, then I'm heading back. Understand? I can't risk my boat."

"I understand." Suzie nodded. As Mike's boat approached Simon's place she noticed Paul's boat at the dock. A sense of relief and terror flooded her. Relief that Paul was there, but terror that Simon might have done something to hurt him. "Look Mary. Do you see Paul on the boat?"

Mary leaned forward over the railing and shook her head. "No, I don't see anyone on there."

"What will it be ladies, am I leaving you here, or taking you back with me?" Mike looked at them both with taut lips, then up at the dark sky. "There's very little time left to get back to the docks."

"Mary, why don't you go back with him? You can check on Jason and Summer while I ride back with Paul."

Mary's hand closed over Suzie's. She met Suzie's eyes. "I'm not going anywhere without you, Suzie. If you're getting off this boat, so am I."

Suzie nodded and looked over at Mike. "I guess we're both getting off here."

He hesitated and looked at the sky again. “Are you sure? This looks pretty nasty.”

“We’ll be fine.” Suzie swung her leg over the side of the boat. Mike stepped up to help her over, then helped Mary as well. As the boat lurched away from the dock Mike called out to them again.

“Don’t let Paul get on the water in this. You three hunker down with Simon. He’ll take care of you.”

Suzie grimaced at the thought, but she waved to Mike as he turned the boat around. Briefly she considered calling him back, but that ship had sailed. She turned back to Simon’s house. The property was as littered with debris as it had been when she had visited before, but somehow in the eerie glow of the storm that approached everything appeared dangerous. Was the mess evidence of a murderous mind? Had she overlooked clear signs that Simon was a danger to Paul? She pushed the thoughts down and walked beside Mary up the hill towards the small house. This time there was no delicious smell coming from the kitchen. In fact, like Jason had said it didn’t seem to her that anyone was home. It struck her then that Simon’s boat was not there.

“Oh no!” Suzie turned back towards the small dock. “Paul must have gone on Simon’s boat with him.”

“You’re right, they’re not here.” Mary turned away from the window she’d peered through. “There’s no one inside.”

“That means Simon could have taken him anywhere. And in this storm. We have to find them!”

“Maybe we should call Jason, I bet he has a way to track the boat.” Mary pulled out her phone.

“That’s it!” Suzie snapped her fingers. “Mary, you’re a genius.”

“What?” Mary’s finger hovered above the keypad.

“Yesterday Paul and I put a tracking device on Simon’s boat. That’s how we discovered that he went out to the pearl farm in the middle of the night. I bet it’s still active. As long as the feed is live we can track Simon’s boat from Paul’s.”

“That’s great, Suzie, but we don’t have a captain.” Mary shook her head. “How are we going to track them if they’re traveling on water?”

“We have no other choice. We’re going to have to try. Paul has shown me enough to handle the boat in case of an emergency.”

“Well, this is certainly an emergency.” Mary followed Suzie down towards the dock. Just as they reached the boat a clap of

thunder made them both jump. It was not the type of storm that anyone should be headed out to sea in, especially Suzie and Mary, who had about as much experience with boats as a guest on a cruise ship. Suzie paused and looked over at Mary.

"You should stay here. Call Jason. Tell him what's happening and to send a boat out to pick you up."

"No Suzie, I'm not going to do that."

"What if they come back? Someone will need to be here to explain why Paul's boat is missing."

Mary narrowed her eyes. She stepped onto the boat. "You are not going out into those rough waters without me, Suzie. We are in this together, just like everything else we've ever been through."

Suzie smiled at her and offered a quick hug before heading for the controls. As much as she wanted Mary to be safe, it was a relief to know that she always had her back. As the boat sped off across the water Suzie did her best to remain in control of it. Mary held on to the tracking device. But the waves grew bigger, and the boat lurched from side to side.

"Can you tell where they are, Mary?"

"Not far, Suzie. Just keep going. Not far."

It wasn't long before Suzie recognized the path they took. They were headed straight for the pearl farm.

"Why are they going out there?" Her breath caught in her throat. Was Simon taking him out there to hurt him? She stared so hard at the water ahead of her that her eyes stung. Simon's boat had to be somewhere. As she suspected it was right beside the dock at the pearl farm.

"There!" Suzie pointed to it. "Let's get close."

"All right. But I don't see anyone on the boat, Suzie."

As soon as they were close enough Suzie climbed off the boat and onto the dock. She peered into Simon's boat. "Paul?"

"Is he there, Suzie?"

"He must be in the cabin." Suzie's heart lurched. If Paul wasn't answering her there had to be a reason. She boarded the boat and walked through it. "No, no, it's empty." Suzie cringed as she looked through the boat one more time. The only thing that gave her any comfort was the fact that there was no evidence of a fight onboard the boat.

"Then they must be somewhere on the land." Mary scanned the horizon. "Is there even anything out here?"

“Yes, there’s a house about a mile in. We’re going to have to hike. Are you up for it?” Suzie frowned with concern. Mary nodded and straightened her shoulders.

“I can handle it.”

As they began down the path towards the house Suzie watched for any sign of the direction that Paul and Simon took. Was Paul his hostage? Did Simon convince him that he was innocent? If so, what were they doing at the pearl farm? About halfway to the house, Suzie heard a sound in the distance. It sounded like the slam of a car door. They were far from the driveway and any road. But obviously there was a vehicle nearby.

“Mary, did you hear that?”

“Yes. I think it came from over there.” She pointed to a low hill not far from where they stood.

“Sh.” Suzie put her finger to her lips then began walking in the direction of the hill. Mary walked right behind her. “I think there’s a car over there. Do you see it?”

“I think so.” Mary peered through the brush. “Is that even a road?”

“Whether it is or not, they’ve turned it into one.”

“Do you think Paul is in the car?”

“I’m not sure. But I’m going to find out. You stay here.” She turned to look at Mary.

“Suzie, I said I would stick with you and I meant it.”

“Mary, if something goes wrong and I end up in danger, I’m going to need you to get help. You’re the only one that knows what’s going on here. If I’m not back in ten minutes, go back to Paul’s boat and use the radio to call Jason for help. Okay?”

“No, it’s not okay.” Mary frowned. “What if something happens to you?”

“I will be fine, I promise. I need to know that you can call for help if we need it. Will you do that?”

“Yes, I will.” Mary’s hands balled into fists at her sides. “But I don’t like this. Not at all.”

“I know that.” She looked through the brush again, then back at Mary. “Everything will be fine. Remember, we have a wedding to host.”

“Yes, a wedding.” She nodded. “So make sure you don’t get hurt.”

“Don’t worry.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19

Suzie slipped through the brush towards the car. She could hear muffled voices but couldn't make out what they were saying. Then she heard Paul's familiar voice.

"This is crazy. You are not going to get away with this."

"But I already have. No one knows that you're here, do they?"

"Look, there has to be a reasonable way that we can work this out."

"No, there's really not." Suzie crept a few steps forward in an attempt to get a good look at the man she heard. However, when she set her foot down, she shattered a shell beneath her shoe. The sound drew the attention of an armed man. She couldn't make out who he was, but he was headed straight towards her. Suzie's breath caught in her throat when she saw the man who held the gun. Pedro.

"Well, look who it is?" Pedro pointed the gun at her. She held her breath. Even with her panicked mind she remembered the cut on his hand and the oyster shells in his trashcan and in that moment she could think of a thousand ways that she could have avoided exposing herself to him. However, it was too late for that. She looked past Pedro, at Paul, who grimaced the moment he saw her. "Your girlfriend is here?" Pedro smirked at Paul. "Time for a party." Pedro moved his gun from Suzie and pointed it at Paul. "Hm?"

"Leave her alone!" Paul demanded sharply.

"Looks like I can handle everyone at once. Come on." He waved his gun at Suzie to move her in the direction of the door.

Suzie's eyes widened when she saw Simon stagger to his feet as Pedro pointed the gun at him. Simon kept his eyes to the ground. Was he even involved in this? Pedro ushered them towards a path.

“Let them go, they didn’t have anything to do with this,” Simon said.

“Sure. I’ll just let you all walk away, now that you know that I’m involved. Move it.” He shoved Simon forward. Paul looked over at her with wide eyes as if he might lunge for the gun, but she shook her head slightly. It was too risky. She held her breath as they walked past the area where Mary was a few moments before. Luckily there was no sign of her. Pedro led the three of them back to Simon’s boat and ordered them on board. Suzie tried to convince herself that he would be merciful and let them go, but she knew that there wasn’t much chance of that.

“Go inside.” Pedro waved the gun in their direction.

“Why? What are you going to do?” Paul started to move towards Suzie, but Pedro held him back. “Get inside.” He released the safety on the weapon. “Don’t move, or you’re not going to live to take another breath.”

Simon walked into the cabin. Pedro shoved Paul in. Suzie followed close behind.

“Against the wall.” He gestured with the gun towards the back wall of Simon’s boat. Simon didn’t argue. When Paul stood still and didn’t move he aimed the gun at Suzie’s head. “Up against the wall, Paul! Or she gets it.” Paul went against the wall next to Simon.

“What are you going to do to us?” Suzie stared at Pedro and kept her feet planted exactly where she was.

“Do as I say.” Pedro gestured to the wall again. “Oh no, Simon’s about to be held responsible for another murder.” He grimaced.

Suzie regulated the pattern of her breaths in an attempt to avoid panic. She suspected that the moment her back hit the wall the man would pull the trigger and they would all be killed, and he planned to frame Simon for their murders. She thought of Mary and wondered if she would be able to get help. Outside the boat she heard a loud roll of thunder. Rain pelted the boat and the rough water around it. With the storm that raged no helicopter or boat would be able to reach them anytime soon.

“Not unless you tell me what is going on here. What are you going to do?” She looked into Pedro’s eyes. They were cold and indicated that he had no desire to sympathize with her. However, he lowered the weapon a few inches. “These are the people you have known for years. They are your friends. Robbie was a fisherman and just a young man.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care about any of that. Robbie was not one of us, he was a coward and he is a part of my past. You’re all going to be just a part of my past. So close your mouth and do as I say.”

“Why would you kill us? You could just let us go. Are you really going to shoot all three of us?” Suzie asked.

“Shoot? No. I don’t need any more drama again.” Pedro smirked. “The storm can do my dirty work for me.”

“Why are you doing this?” Suzie asked. “Did you kill Robbie?” She wanted to keep him talking and she wanted a full confession.

“Enough!” Pedro said harshly. He reached down and threw some ropes to Paul and Simon. “Tie them up, around the railing.” He gestured to Suzie.

“But we’ll never survive out there on the water,” Suzie said.

“Exactly.” He aimed the gun at Suzie. She bent down and tied the ropes around Simon’s hands, her hands were trembling. Then she tied them around Paul’s. She tried to keep them loose. Pedro gestured to the wall. “Now, against the wall.”

She backed up against the wall next to Paul. She moved closer to him.

“Stop!” Pedro shouted. “Stay exactly where you are.” Suzie stopped. Maybe the illusion of compliance would keep her alive long enough to form a plan. If Pedro didn’t plan to shoot them they had a better chance of survival. But what were the chances with the storm that thrashed the water around the boat?

The boat started moving more violently as the storm picked up. She wondered if she might be able to use that to her advantage. Pedro trained his gun on her. She needed a way out. Maybe if she could distract him she could get the gun away from him.

“Oh, I’m feeling so sick.” She pressed her hand against her stomach. “I can’t help it, I think I’m going to vomit. Can I go to the bathroom?”

“Stay right there.”

She groaned and made a choking sound in her throat. “Ugh, I’m going to be sick.” She coughed and gurgled.

“Shut up!” He grimaced as there was a loud crash of thunder and the boat lurched to the side. All of a sudden she saw her opportunity and lunged forward. She reached for the wrist of the hand that held the gun in the same moment that she drove her shoulder into his chest. However, Pedro was much stronger than she expected and more used to the rolling seas. He wobbled a little,

but did not tumble. The force did knock the gun out of his hand. When it fell to the floor of the boat a shot rang out. Suzie froze. Had she been hit? Had Paul or Simon been hit?

After a moment passed and no one cried out in pain and she could feel no searing pain anywhere in her body Suzie dove for the weapon. Pedro dove for it at the same time. She managed to snatch it up before he did. The boat rocked so hard that Suzie rolled to the other side of the boat. She almost lost her footing. She gripped the gun as tight as she could. Water spurted through the hole that the stray bullet had left in the boat. Pedro also fell with the lurch of the boat. He crawled towards the door. She rushed up to him and lifted the butt of the gun prepared to slam it down on his head and knock him out, but before she could he swept his leg through her legs and she crashed to the floor. As she did she lost the grip on the gun and Pedro snatched it off the ground and shoved it in her face as he got to his feet. Suzie shuddered at the sound of a crash of thunder.

"Nice try." He smirked. "Now against the wall!" He shouted. She stood up and walked towards the wall.

"Suzie." Paul frowned. "Are you okay?"

"I am. Are you?" She looked into his eyes.

He nodded and glanced over at Pedro. "Just let us go. There's no reason to make this worse."

"Oh, I'm going to let you go all right. I'm just going to tie Suzie up." He grabbed a length of rope and tied her hands up. She hoped that if she didn't fight he wouldn't bother to tie the rope too tight, but she was wrong. He tied it so tight that it cut into her wrists. She bit into her bottom lip to keep from crying out.

Pedro checked Paul and Simon's ropes and tightened them. Once they were all tightly tied up, Pedro headed towards the cabin door.

"Pedro." Simon spoke for the first time. "Don't let them die this way."

"Ha Ha, acting innocent now," Pedro said. "If you didn't stuff up and get caught by Robbie then we wouldn't be in this mess and Robbie would be alive."

"You can kill me, but please let them go," Simon pleaded. As Suzie listened to the conversation she tried to make sense of what they were saying. Was he trying to save them? Was Simon innocent?

"Good luck." Pedro chuckled as he pulled the cabin door shut. Suzie heard something slide into place to block them in. As her

heart raced she looked over at Paul.

"What are our chances?"

He looked into her eyes. "It's you and me, darling. There's no chance we won't get out of this. Turn your back to mine, I'll get you untied." He stretched out his hands towards her, but the fact that they were tied around the railing restricted his movement. She did as he instructed while she kept a watchful eye on Simon in the corner. His rough fingertips scraped along her palm and wrists as he tugged at the ropes around her wrists. She winced as the harder he tugged the tighter they became.

"Paul, it's not working. It's not working." She pulled her hands away from him. "You're making it tighter."

"I'm sorry without being able to see it's really hard to do."

"Let me help." Simon stood up from the corner. His hands were untied and in one hand he held a knife.

"How did you get out of the rope, Simon?" Suzie shied back as he approached her.

"I had a knife in my pocket. Pedro didn't find it because I keep it tucked behind my cigarette pack. It throws off the cops, too." He held the knife out towards her. "Let me get you free."

"Don't come near me." She glared at him.

"Suzie, it's okay," Paul said.

"It's not, Paul. He's the one that caused all of this. He's the one that killed Robbie."

"He didn't." Paul frowned. "Pedro did and now, we're all in the same boat, literally. Simon's not going to hurt you."

"I wish I could believe that."

"Let me show you." Simon lowered the knife but stepped towards her. "I'm not going to hurt you, Suzie. I know what you must think of me, and you're not wrong. I did a horrible thing. I kept his murderer a secret. I did try to save him. If I wasn't involved he might never have been murdered. But I'm not going to make the same mistake again, I'm not going to let someone else die. If we're going to survive this storm we're all going to have to work together."

Suzie's stomach churned at the thought of working with someone that was involved in a murder. She glanced over at Paul who nodded to her. With a deep sigh she turned her back to Simon. With every step he took towards her she waited for the plunge of the knife into her back. However, all she felt was the cool glide of

the blade against her wrist as he slipped it between her skin and the tight ropes around it. With one sharp movement he cut her free. Her eyes filled with tears as the pain in her wrists finally eased. She rubbed them and turned back to face him.

"Give me the knife." She held out her hand to him.

"What? I can free Paul."

"No. You're not going anywhere near him with that knife. Give it to me and I will cut him loose."

"What if you decide to kill me first?" Simon stared at her.

"Of the two of us, who has more chance of doing that?" She glared into his eyes. Simon frowned and glanced over at Paul.

"You weren't lying about her courage."

"Give her the knife, Simon. This boat is going down fast." Paul looked towards the water that reached up to his ankles. Simon handed her the knife. Suzie hurried over to Paul and cut his hands free. Then she tucked the knife into her back pocket. There was no time to argue or even discuss their escape. The boat lurched hard to the left, then to the right, and a huge wave of water washed into the cabin. She shoved her shoulder against the door in an attempt to open it, but it wouldn't budge.

"We're not going to get out this way," Suzie said.

"Simon, grab that ax!" Paul pointed to an ax that hung on a wall among other tools. "We're going to hack our way out."

"Good idea." Simon grabbed the ax and tossed it to Paul. Paul swung it hard at the door. He continued to swing, harder and harder, until finally the door splintered open. He made enough of an opening to get through.

"Stay close. This boat might roll." Paul grabbed her hand and guided her out in front of him. As soon as Suzie was outside she was hit with a deluge of rain. She tried to see past it, but it was impossible. Paul and Simon climbed out onto the deck after her. Just as they made it out, the boat surged hard to the right, and Suzie lost all sense of direction as she flew up into the air.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 20

Mary pulled herself to her feet, but the slippery deck of Paul's boat made it nearly impossible to keep her footing. She wrapped her arms around the railing and clung tight. She peered through the driving rain in the direction of the last place that she saw Simon's boat. However, all she could make out were rolling waves. She saw no sign of the boat. Her heart dropped into the pit of her stomach. Where was Suzie? All of her seasickness left her as she was sick with worry.

"Suzie!" She screamed her name, but the roar of the wind ripped it away. She'd never experienced anything more frustrating than screaming without making much of a sound. She rushed back to the radio again and grabbed it. She hadn't been able to hear a response from anyone. She had no idea if anyone was on the way.

"Jason, are you out there? Jason?"

The crackle that returned over the radio had a hint of a voice. She squeezed the radio in her hand. "Jason, please. I'm on Paul's boat. We're out on the water. Simon's boat is gone, we need help out here! At the pearl farm!"

Again the radio crackled. She still couldn't make out what was said. To her relief the rain began to let up. It seemed to her that the wind pushed the boat far from the last place she'd seen Simon's boat. Seconds later flashing lights in the distance drew her attention. She recognized the police boat and yelled as loud as she could.

"Jason!" Mary waved furiously to him from the boat. "Jason!"

The police boat drifted close to Paul's. "Mary, are you okay? Where are Suzie and Paul?"

"I don't know. I've been searching for them. They were trapped on Simon's boat. I tried to get to them, but the storm kept pushing

me away. Jason, I'm afraid something terrible has happened."

Jason shaded his eyes as he looked over the water. "Knowing my cousin, she is just fine. Look. Maybe they are there, I think I see some movement." He looked through his binoculars and pointed to a small scrap of land that couldn't even be called an island. "I bet they're over there. Let's go take a look." He offered her a hand to help her onto his boat. One of the patrol officers climbed onto Paul's boat.

"Take it back to the docks, but don't let anyone else touch it. Understand?"

"Yes sir." He nodded as he took control of Paul's boat. Mary clung to the sides of the seat she perched on.

"Please hurry, Jason. This storm is terrible."

Jason headed for the piece of land. "Keep an eye out, Mary, if you see anyone in the water let me know."

"I'm looking." Mary's voice wavered with fear. She leaned so far forward that she could feel the spray from the water as the boat ploughed through it. Fresh tears flooded her eyes which made it hard for her to see. She blinked them back and stared hard at the water. By the time they reached the land the tears fell freely down her cheeks.

"Are they there? Do you see them?" Jason grimaced and pulled out a pair of binoculars. He scanned as much of the land as he could see. Just when he was going to put the binoculars away he saw a big piece of cloth. It flapped in the wind that still blew hard across the water.

"Suzie?" He shouted and climbed off the boat. Mary followed after him and scrambled to get from the water to the sand.

"Do you see her? Where is she? Suzie! Paul!"

"Here!" Suzie's voice carried across the sand. Mary's heart raced with joy. Suzie pushed herself to her feet and waved her arms above her head. "We're here!"

Jason jogged up to her. "Are you hurt?" He looked her over.

"No, I'm okay. But Paul, and Simon." She gestured to the two men on the sand beside her.

"Paul!" Jason dropped down beside him. "Can you hear me?"

"I can." Paul's voice shook as he spoke. "I'm okay, just a little tired."

Jason began to assess his vitals. Mary threw her arms around Suzie. "I'm so sorry I couldn't get to you. I tried so hard."

“You stayed with me, Mary.” Suzie hugged her back as she peered over her shoulder at Paul who managed to sit up. “I heard you the entire time. Your voice kept me going. We made it to land, and I knew that you would be sending help.”

“Jason, don’t fuss over me, I’m fine.” Paul waved him away, though his skin was pale and his lips tinted blue. “I swallowed a bit too much sea water that’s all. I’ll be fine once it settles.”

“They can check that out at the hospital.” Jason looked him hard in the eyes. “No argument.”

“No argument.” Paul held up his hands. He looked over at Simon who was still lying on the sand as a police officer administered mouth to mouth. “I had to knock him out. He fought me when I tried to pull him out of the water. I don’t know how much water he took in. He was stealing pearls from the farm with Pedro, but Pedro killed Robbie. Pedro is the murderer. You have to get him.”

“Don’t worry about that now. We’ll get him. Let’s just get you home.” Jason looked over Simon and nodded. “He’s still alive. I’ll get some back-up.” As Jason spoke into his radio Suzie pulled away from Mary and wrapped her arms around Paul. She kissed his forehead and cheek.

“I’m so glad that you’re okay,” Paul said.

“Me, too.” Suzie patted his back and shook her head.

“You two gave me such a scare. I’m getting too old for this you know,” Mary said.

“The way you handled my boat told a different story. I’m amazed that you were able to keep it afloat in that storm. If you hadn’t, who knows what might have happened.”

“Let’s not think about that now.” Suzie sighed and closed her eyes as she held onto him. “We made it. That’s all I want to think about.”

A wave of relief, larger than any the storm had carved from the sea gave her such a deep sense of comfort that tears flooded her eyes. She wanted nothing more than to remain there in his grasp, but the police would have questions, and the wedding needed to go on. She reluctantly pulled away and looked into both Paul and Mary’s faces in turn.

“I love you both so much. Thank you for being here for me.”

“We were here for each other.” Mary smiled between them. “Like we always will be.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 21

Once Paul was cleared by the doctors he went back to Dune House with Suzie. At the bed and breakfast Suzie, Mary, and Paul huddled around the kitchen table. Summer poured them each a cup of tea, then joined them. Jason spoke on his cell phone a few feet away.

“What I don’t understand is, why would Pedro kill Robbie if they were in on the thefts together?” Suzie frowned.

“That’s not what happened. Robbie had no idea what Simon was doing. Simon said that he was taking tourists out for night trips and asked to use Robbie’s boat because it was new. He gave him part of the earnings,” Paul said.

“That’s where Robbie got all of the money from.” Suzie shook her head.

“Yes, only Simon was not taking tourists out. He was working with Pedro to steal pearls from the pearl farm. April alerted them when it was a suitable time, because they promised her she would get a share. She wanted to get away from her family. She met Simon through Pedro, and Simon got involved, too. But Robbie never did.”

“So, Robbie was innocent,” Suzie smiled.

“Yes, it seems that way.”

“Robbie was becoming suspicious about what Simon was doing and started asking questions so Simon got worried. Robbie asked him if he could go out for the night trip with him on the day he was murdered. Simon said yes, but he sabotaged Robbie’s boat because if the boat was giving trouble then Simon had an excuse not to take it out that night without making Robbie more suspicious.”

“Wow, complicated but clever,” Suzie said. “But the mechanic fixed it.”

“Simon thought that Robbie would call the regular mechanic

who he knew was away so he thought he would have to wait, but Robbie got Gill to look at it and it was fixed quickly."

"Why did Pedro kill Robbie?" Suzie asked.

"I'm getting there," Paul said. "Simon had stashed the pearls on Robbie's boat because the dock was busy. He knew that the boat was fixed because Simon gave Gill a lift back. After he had dropped off Gill, Simon knew that he had to get the pearls and sabotage Robbie's boat again, so he couldn't take the boat out and it would just look like Gill hadn't fixed it properly. He wore a yellow jacket to look like Gill so if anyone saw him and told Robbie, he would think that it was still Gill on his boat. But it all went wrong when Robbie came back to the boat and caught Simon getting the pearls he had stashed. Robbie then knew about the thefts at the pearl farm and he knew exactly what Simon had done."

"Was he going to turn him in?" Suzie asked.

"No, according to Simon he wasn't as long as they stopped. Simon was happy to take Robbie's word that he would keep quiet. But Pedro came back to the boat and he didn't trust that Robbie would keep his mouth shut and he didn't want to give up on the money from the pearls they were stealing. Simon tried to reason with Pedro, but Pedro took the oyster shucker from the table and stabbed Robbie to get rid of the problem."

"How terrible." Suzie stared hard at the table. "This entire time I've suspected Robbie and the truth was he was killed by a fellow fisherman, all because of money."

"Simon said he wanted to protect him and he tried to help Robbie. That's how he got blood on the jacket. But he was scared of going to jail and scared that Pedro would kill him if he told the police what had happened."

"Why did you go to the pearl farm with Simon?" Suzie asked.

"Simon was worried that Pedro was going to hurt April to keep her quiet so we went there to protect her," Paul said.

"Just awful." Mary clutched her cup of tea.

"The important thing is that the murder is solved, and everyone is safe." Paul looked around the table at the group as Jason hung up his phone and joined them. "That never would have happened without all of us working together."

"He's right." Jason nodded. "If we dwell on what could have happened we won't be able to move forward." He looked over at Summer and smiled. He was distracted by the ring of his cell phone

again. He walked away to answer it. As Suzie watched she saw his muscles relax. He strode back towards them with a smile on his face after he had hung up. “Good news. Pedro has just been arrested.”

“That is good. We can put this all behind us,” Paul said solemnly.

“I think we’ve weathered this storm pretty well,” Jason said.

“Yes, we have,” Summer said. “We can always have the wedding another day.”

“What?” Suzie shook her head. “Absolutely not. The wedding must go on.”

“Oh Suzie, don’t you want to rest and recover from all of this? Do you really think you’ll be up for it?” Summer said.

“Sweetheart, one of the main reasons I fought so hard was because I had this wedding to look forward to. Mary and I can get everything set up at Dune House. Your family and friends that flew from out-of-town are already settled here. Everything will be just fine, Summer. Unless you two really want to postpone, it is your day.”

“I don’t.” Jason looked into Summer’s eyes. “The last thing I want is to go another day without being married to you. Do you think we can still do this?”

Summer smiled and gave his hand a squeeze. “I feel the same way, Jason. If everyone is still willing, then I am more than happy to go through with it.”

“Wonderful.” Suzie smiled with relief. “I can’t wait. Mary, you and I have some work to do.”

“Let’s get to it.” Mary stood up. “As for you two, early to bed, and plenty of rest, hm?” She looked between Summer and Jason.

“Yes ma’am.” Jason smiled and stood up as well.

By the time the last of the pre-wedding preparations were completed, Suzie was exhausted. It was hard to believe that she’d survived a storm on the ocean that morning, and had a hand in a killer being arrested. She collapsed into bed, ready to sleep forever. Yet again she closed her eyes for what felt like five minutes, when she opened them again the sun glared through the window. Her heart raced. Did she oversleep? A quick glance at the clock reassured her that she woke up right on time.

The scent of coffee and pancakes alerted her to the fact that Mary was already up and cooking breakfast for their guests. Since the wedding was in the afternoon they had offered to host a brunch

for the out-of-town guests. Suzie climbed out of bed and swayed. For a moment it seemed as if she was back on the boat. As she regained her balance a surge of gratitude washed over her. What she had survived the day before was nothing short of amazing. The thought of not being able to be there for the wedding had made her determined to get through. It had all turned out well, but she wasn't naive enough not to recognize just how lucky she was. She dressed and met Mary in the kitchen.

"What can I help with?"

"Pancakes need flipping!" She tossed her the spatula. Suzie caught it and began flipping the pancakes. Being side by side with Mary was the most natural position that she could imagine. Not long ago she didn't even realize she was lonely, now her life was filled with warmth, excitement, and love. As the guests made their way down into the kitchen everyone buzzed with conversation about the wedding. Suzie excused herself to make some last minute phone calls to confirm things for the wedding.

Once outside on the deck where it was a bit quieter she spotted the chairs and archway being set up on the sand. The beach would be a perfect backdrop for the wedding photographs. Despite the chaos that had led up to the day of the wedding, everything had fallen into place quite nicely. After confirming with vendors and the bakery that all deliveries would be made on time Suzie stretched her arms above her head and took a deep breath of the sea air.

"Gorgeous."

She turned with a smile at the sound of Paul's voice. When she met his eyes he wrapped his arms around her. "I almost didn't want to say a word, but you were too beautiful to resist."

"Hm, sounds like you're getting into a romantic mood from all this wedding chatter."

"I'm just so glad that you're here to hold, that I'm here to hold you. That close call yesterday reminded me of just how lucky I am." He brushed his palm along her cheek. "I hope that you feel the same way about me."

"I do." She kissed him lightly on the lips. "I am very lucky. My life has changed so much, and never once could I have imagined that moving here would turn out to be such an adventure."

"I wish you had never been in any danger, Suzie, but I'm glad that we were there for each other when we needed each other."

"Me too, Paul." She tightened her arms around his waist. "If

there is ever any trouble that we face, I know that we will be able to handle it together. The only other person I've trusted that much is Mary."

"Then I'm honored to be included in that small group." He smiled. "I think I'm going to make a captain out of her yet."

"If you can get her back out on a boat after yesterday, I'll believe in miracles."

"That will make two of us."

As the ceremony started Paul led Suzie down the aisle. Paul left her by the bridesmaids and took his place with the groomsmen. Suzie was relieved that the crime had been solved and everyone could relax.

Jason met Suzie's eyes with a smile of gratitude. Then all attention shifted to the bride. Summer stepped out on the side deck of Dune House with her arm wrapped around her father's. The sunlight caught the subtle jewels in her gown.

Each one sparkled as she began to walk towards Jason. That was what it looked like to Suzie. Summer's gaze didn't stray to her guests, to her father, or to any other family members. Her eyes locked to Jason's the moment she took that first step, and remained there as her father pressed her hand into Jason's. "I decided to add an inscription to our rings." He smiled at Summer. "I know that we've both weathered a lot. I know that as we move forward in life we will face a lot more. But just as the ring says, I know that no matter what, as long as we are together, we will make it."

"Through any storm." Summer blinked back tears as she read the inscription. "Yes, Jason, through any storm." She leaned forward and kissed him. The minister cleared his throat.

"Excuse me, it's not time for that yet."

Jason grinned as Summer blushed and pulled away. "Oh, it's

always time for that." He winked at her. The crowd laughed and clapped. The minister blushed. As the ceremony continued Suzie's heart warmed with the hope of what might come next. Perhaps the week began with murder, but it was ending with the promise of a new beginning, and all of the joy that would come with it. And she had no doubt that the future held many more unexpected surprises.

The End

OceanofPDF.com

DANGER IN THE DEPTHS

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 9

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

Salt laced the air as it drifted beneath her nostrils. Mary drew in a lung-filling breath, then released it in a slow sigh. At times she still had to remind herself that this wasn't a dream. She really was living right by the sea, in a grand house that she and her best friend, Suzie, had renovated into its former glory as a bed and breakfast. She'd transitioned from the tail-end of a rough marriage and a rougher divorce, into what she could only describe as paradise.

"More cream?" Suzie nudged a small cornflower blue pitcher towards her.

"Yes, thank you." Mary picked up the pitcher and poured a bit more cream into her lukewarm coffee. They'd been sitting on the porch that overlooked the water since dawn. Now that the little town of Garber was coming alive, Mary glanced at her watch. "I can't believe that in a few more hours Cathy and Ben will be here."

"I'm so excited to see them." Suzie picked up her mug of coffee and took a tiny sip. "I'm sure they'll both have so much to tell you."

"They've been so busy lately, I've barely heard from them." Mary gazed out across the water as it rippled with lazy waves. "I've never felt so distant from them before."

"It's only natural." Suzie placed her hand over Mary's and offered a gentle squeeze. "They are busy right now, but soon they will be calling you night and day for advice."

"You're right." Mary tipped her head towards a small shack further down the beach. "It looks like Curtis is already at it this morning. I can see a light on in the shack."

"He grabbed a cup of coffee on his way out this morning. He said the weather was perfect for a long dive."

"It's so nice to have him nearby. I've learned so much about diving since he's been here," Mary said.

“Me too. Although, I’m not sure that I’m ready to take the plunge myself.”

“Me neither.” Mary laughed. “I think I’m better off on dry land. However, I bet Ben and Cathy would love it.”

“Oh, what a great idea! I know Trish and Hal have been taking lessons from him since they’ve been here. They said it was one of the highlights of their romantic getaway at Dune House. Trish told me he’s a fantastic teacher.”

“I’m sure he is.” Mary cleared her throat and took the last swallow of her coffee.

“Wait a minute, what’s that about?” Suzie met her eyes across the table.

“Hm? Nothing.”

“Oh no, that wasn’t nothing. That was something.”

“No, not really. Trish and Hal are nice kids.”

“They’re in their thirties, only about twenty years younger than us.”

“Still kids.” Mary smiled and picked up Suzie’s empty mug. “Time to get things straightened up, and breakfast ready for Trish and Hal. Do you want me to toast you a bagel?”

“Sure, thank you. I’ll check the linens and run the vacuum upstairs after Trish and Hal are up.” Suzie paused at the door. “Oops, I forgot we can’t go in or out this way. When did that locksmith say he was coming?”

“He is supposed to be here today, but I’m not holding my breath. I’ve heard he’s not the most reliable guy, but he’s the only one in town, and you said you want to use only local businesses wherever possible.”

“I know, it’s worth the wait to put our money into our local economy. If he’s not here by tomorrow, we’ll have to get someone else though. I’m too old and tired to be walking all the way around to the front.”

“Ha! You’re old and tired?” Mary rolled her eyes. “Tell me another one.”

As they walked around to the front of Dune House Suzie caught a glimpse of the shack on the beach again.

“I hope his business does well. I’d love to see him stay here.”

“Me too. He seems like a nice person.” Mary opened the door and held it open for Suzie.

“He’ll attract a younger crowd, too.” Just as Suzie stepped into

Dune House her cell phone chimed. She picked it up to see that she had a text message.

"Oh, it's from Jason! He's letting us know that he and Summer landed just fine and are having a great time."

"Wonderful!" Mary smiled. "I'm so glad to hear it."

"Me too. I hope they really have a chance to relax and enjoy married life. They had to wait so long before they could go away on their honeymoon."

"Yes, they did, I'm sure they're treasuring every moment."

Mary thought about Wes being away for a family wedding and wished he was there. He had asked her to come along, but with her children visiting she had declined. She surprised herself when she missed him as they hadn't been going out for very long, but this was the first time that they had been apart from each other for more than a few days.

Mary lingered in the kitchen to prepare breakfast for their guests, while Suzie went to the laundry room to collect the linens she'd washed the night before. It wasn't always easy to keep up with all of the needs of Dune House, but she loved every minute. There was nowhere else on Earth she would rather be. Of course that was because of more than just the rambling three story home she'd inherited from an estranged uncle. It was her cousin Jason, Mary, and all of the people she'd met in Garber that made her so content. After many years of believing she never wanted to settle down, she discovered that she had finally found the place where she belonged. As she opened the door to the laundry room she heard voices. They sounded strange, as if they were floating from thin air. After a moment she realized that they were coming through the laundry chute from the third floor.

"You're being ridiculous, Hal. You're seeing things that aren't there."

"Am I?" His voice was stern. "Because every time I turned around you were smiling at him, touching him, or laughing at one of his stupid jokes."

"They're not stupid, they're funny, that's why I'm laughing. Of course I'm going to be friendly, he's teaching us how to dive."

"Just watch how friendly you get." The voice drifted away as the couple walked further away from the laundry chute. Suzie cringed. She tried not to get too involved in private matters, especially those of her guests, but it sounded like quite a bit of tension brewed

between the couple. She finished gathering the linens then left the laundry room.

Suzie could hear Hal and Trish as they talked with Mary around the dining room table. Everything sounded calmer. She tried not to focus on the argument. As far as she knew it was normal for married couples to squabble. That was one of the main reasons she never wanted to get married. She hated the idea of having to answer for her every move and thought. No matter how many times other people told her that marriage wasn't always that way, she didn't want to risk it. Still, for some reason the pesky desire to get hitched had crept up lately and she was having a hard time ignoring it. She blamed it on Paul, a fisherman who had sailed into her life, and taken her heart by storm. At least, that was the way she remembered it. As much as she tried to fight it, she enjoyed spending time with him, and even missed him when he was out on the water. Luckily, she had the bed and breakfast to distract her.

As Suzie vacuumed the upstairs she hummed to herself. She'd never expected to be content in domestic activities, but when it came to her role as caretaker she took it very seriously. As she vacuumed near the window she noticed a taxi pull up. Excitement raced through her as she realized that Mary's children had arrived. "Mary! Mary, they're here!" Suzie nearly tripped over the cord of the vacuum as she ran down the hallway. She caught herself on the wall and straightened up as she reached the stairs. Mary passed the bottom of the stairs as she hurried towards the front door, though her troublesome knees caused her to move a bit slower than she would like. Suzie managed to catch up with her at the door.

"Okay, wait a minute." She caught Mary's hand before she could open the door. "Deep breath, right?"

"Yes, deep breath." Mary took a long, deep breath and held it for a moment before she released it again. Then she opened the door. She found her daughter Cathy on the other side.

"Mom!" Cathy flung her arms wide open. It was as touching to Mary to see her adult daughter seek her embrace as it had been the first time Cathy had reached for her as a baby. She wrapped her arms around her and mumbled into her long auburn hair. "I promised myself I wasn't going to cry."

"No, no crying." Cathy looked into her eyes. "This is a happy moment, right?"

"Yes, you're right." Mary blinked back the tears that had already

formed. “I’m so glad to see you, Cathy. You look as beautiful as ever.”

“Aw, thanks Mom. This is Rick.” Cathy gestured to a young man that hauled two suitcases up the wide, wooden front steps of the porch.

“Oh.” Mary blinked. “Nice to meet you, Rick.” She looked back at her daughter with wide eyes.

“Didn’t you get my text?” Cathy frowned.

“No. What did it say?”

“That I was bringing my boyfriend Rick along with me.” She grimaced. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Oh sure, of course it is. Rick, you must be a very special person if my daughter is fond of you.”

“Thanks.” He grinned and thrust out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, too.”

“You should have seen these two in the taxi on the way here.” Ben rolled his brown eyes and heaved a soft zippered bag up on to his shoulder as he climbed the steps. “Ugh, please, don’t leave me alone with them again.”

“Aw, Ben, don’t give your sister a hard time. Your time will come,” Mary said as she gave him a big hug.

“Listen to Mom, soon enough it’ll be you with a girl on your arm. Oh, I don’t know, maybe when you’re sixty?”

“Keep quiet, Catherine!” Ben exclaimed.

“Cathy, be nice to your brother.”

“I was being nice, he’s the one who…”

“Hello? Is anyone going to hug Aunt Suzie?” Suzie grinned and opened her arms to both of them. The argument was forgotten as Cathy and Ben each took a turn hugging Suzie. Suzie savored the embraces. The only time she doubted her choice not to have children was when Cathy and Ben were around. She loved them almost as much as she imagined she would love her own. The benefit was that she never had to change a diaper, and when they had a problem that was over her head, she could just send them to Mary. “How was your flight?”

“It was fine. A little bumpy.” Ben shrugged. “For a second there I thought Cathy was going to try to jump out.”

“I was a little nervous.” She laughed. “Luckily Rick was there to calm me down.”

“I’m glad you’re all here safe. I can show you your rooms.” Mary

smiled as she led them towards the hall.

"I'll get the bags," Suzie said.

"Oh no, it's fine, I can get them." Rick tightened his grip on the handles. "They're pretty heavy."

"Don't worry, I can handle it." Suzie was so used to helping guests with their bags that the offer was automatic.

"It's all right, I'll get them." He cleared his throat. "It wouldn't feel right to me to let you carry my bags. It wouldn't be respectful."

"Ah, a rare gentleman?"

"Some say that, yes." He smiled, a charming smile, that made Suzie stare at him a little harder. She was always a little suspicious of anyone who was too polite. Like they were trying too hard.

"Feel free, I appreciate the help." Suzie smiled as he walked past her and followed Mary down the hallway.

"I'm afraid I wasn't expecting you to have a guest, Cathy, so I only have two rooms made up, and I guess, well."

"Mom, don't worry. Rick can bunk with Ben. Right Ben?"

"Seriously?" Ben sighed. "I guess so."

"Just until I get another room made up, sweetheart."

"We'll have some time to bond, it'll be great, Ben." Rick ruffled his hair.

"Great." Ben rolled his eyes, but opened the door to his room and let Rick follow after him. While they settled in their rooms, Mary joined Suzie in the kitchen.

"I figured I'd get some snacks together for them, they're probably hungry after the flight."

"Good idea, Suzie. I just can't believe that they're here. I'm so excited."

"The boyfriend was a surprise, hmm?"

"Yes, he was. But honestly I'm glad that he's here. I'd rather Cathy bring him to meet me than to have to wonder about who he is and what he's like. Now I'll have the chance to get to know him."

"That's a good point." Suzie smiled. "I'm glad that you're happy."

"What does that mean?"

"Huh?" She placed a plate of snacks on the dining room table.

"Suzie."

"What?" Her eyes widened.

"I know you, I know your tones, and that comment meant something. What is it?"

“Oh, I don’t know. I just think maybe he’s trying a little too hard.”

“He’s young and in love, if he wasn’t trying hard, I’d be surprised.”

“You’re right. I think I’m just a little out of touch with the younger generation.”

“Don’t you remember when we were the younger generation?” Mary grinned.

“Vaguely.” Suzie laughed.

“I think I’ll take these into the living room so we can all be comfortable.” Mary picked up the tray.

“Go enjoy. I’ll take care of lunch for the guests.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.” Suzie hugged her friend. “I’m so glad they’re here. Now go spend as much time as you can with them.”

“Thank you, I’ll do just that.” Mary carried the tray into the living room just as her two children and Rick emerged from the hallway. Rick and Cathy followed after her, but Ben paused in the kitchen beside Suzie.

“This place is even more amazing than the last time I visited. You’ve done so much more work on it. You did a great job with the upstairs.”

“Thanks Ben.” Suzie smiled at him. “You and your sister are welcome here anytime, you know that don’t you?”

“Sure.” He nodded and brushed his hair away from his eyes. He still reminded Suzie of a puppy dog, too cute for his own good. But he was getting older, and some of the little boy face had begun to fade. “I’m just glad Mom has this, you know. It’s something to keep her occupied, and I know she loves it here.”

“I’m glad she’s here, too. I couldn’t do it without her.”

“How are her knees doing?”

“About the same.”

“I’m worried about her.”

“Try not to be, sweetie, she wouldn’t want you to be. She’s taking care of herself. I’d tell you if she wasn’t.”

“Okay good.” He glanced over his shoulder towards the living room. It seemed to Suzie that he didn’t want to join in.

“Is everything okay, Ben? How is school going?”

“Not great.” He frowned. “I’m having a hard time this year. It’s so much harder than freshman year.”

“Maybe some tutoring would help?”

“I’m in tutoring. It’s like I just can’t keep up. I’m working, and there’s never any time for studying. I’m thinking of dropping out.”

“Oh no, Ben, you can’t do that.”

“Why not?” He frowned. “Not everyone goes to college.”

“No, that’s true, but it’s best if you do. It gives you a good foundation, even if you don’t work in the field of your choice, you’ll always have that degree to support whatever path you take.”

“Now you sound like Mom, I thought you would be more understanding. I mean, I know you went to college, but your job wasn’t exactly run of the mill, and what does investigative journalism have to do with running a bed and breakfast?”

“I worked as a journalist for years before I gave it up. I loved it. Then I discovered that I loved other things, too, and decided to expand my options. I do understand if you don’t want a traditional career, and you know I’ll support whatever you choose, but this is something you need to discuss with your mother. She has great advice to offer, and she knows you better than anyone else, maybe even better than yourself. You can trust her with this, Ben.”

“What if she gets mad?” He sighed. “I’ve gotten myself into some problems lately. I’ve had to borrow money from my dad, and he’s not happy about it.”

“What’s really going on, Ben?” She looked into his eyes. “Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

“It’s nothing. I just need to get my head on straight. Thanks, Aunt Suzie.”

“Ben, make sure you talk to your mother about this, all right? I promise, she’s the most compassionate and understanding person I know. She only wants you to be happy.”

“I will, I’ll talk to her.”

As Ben joined the others in the living room Suzie stared after him. Ben had always been the more sensitive of the two children. Suzie often thought he bore the brunt of his parents’ failing relationship. Cathy seemed to understand and accept when things got hard, but Ben seemed angry and confused. She hoped he hadn’t gotten himself into the kind of trouble that he couldn’t get out of. Once lunch was prepared, Hal and Trish appeared long enough to fill their plates, then disappeared back to their room. Suzie thought it was a little odd, but knew that sometimes guests preferred to have privacy.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

After Suzie cleaned up from lunch she stepped out through the back door to check on a few things in the shed. Then she walked around the side of the house towards the front porch. It was a project that had been on her mind for a long time. She loved decorating and she'd been planning to stain some of the furniture and add some pieces that she and Mary picked up at estate sales. With the good weather she guessed it would be a good time to start on it. As she began to climb the stairs she was startled by a man seated in one of the rocking chairs on the porch. She didn't recognize him, and wasn't expecting any new guests to arrive. He stood up as she reached the top of the steps.

"Hi, I'm Jim." He thrust his hand towards her. She took it in a firm shake and looked into his eyes.

"I'm Suzie. We weren't expecting any guests. Are you looking for a room?"

"Actually, I'm looking for a friend of mine. Curtis Malcolm. He's supposed to be staying here."

"Oh yes, Curtis is staying here. Right now he's out on a dive I think. You're welcome to come in and wait for him."

"No, that's all right. I'll stay out here if that's okay. I like the view."

"Well, it's even better on the other side." She smiled at him and pointed around the corner of the deck. "There are some lounge chairs out there. Feel free to relax and enjoy."

"Thanks so much." He tipped his hat to her then walked around the corner of the house. As she watched him go she noted that he was a fit man, perhaps in his late twenties. She was glad that Curtis had a friend visiting, as so far it didn't seem he'd made many connections with the locals, aside from perhaps Louis, the librarian.

When Suzie stepped back inside Dune House she began to get the items out she needed to prepare dinner for the guests. Mary usually did most of the cooking, but while her children were visiting Suzie wanted her to be as free as possible to enjoy them. She could hear some laughter from the living room and knew that they were already well into a good experience. It filled her heart with warmth to think that Mary was getting the reunion she had hoped for. Even though she was a fantastic mother, she knew that Mary still worried about whether the kids would hold the divorce against her, or with time forget how much she loved them. To Suzie, it seemed impossible, but she wasn't looking at it through a mother's eyes. As she finished preparing the vegetables for dinner she heard the sound of the back door of Dune House swing open, then close.

"I can't believe you came all of this way." She recognized Curtis' voice as it drifted through the entrance way.

"Why not? I can't let you have all of the fun," Jim replied. "It looks like you have a nice setup here."

"It is nice. I'm planning to rent a place in town, but nothing is available until the end of the month. So I've been staying here."

"Gorgeous house."

"Yes, it is. And the two ladies that run it are very kind."

"I noticed. So you'll have to take me down to your favorite dive spot around here."

"Sure, of course I will. Tomorrow maybe?"

"That sounds great. Do you mind if I crash here, too? It seems they might have some rooms available."

"Absolutely, I'll talk to Suzie about it for you. I'm sure she's got something open." As the pair walked into the kitchen Suzie turned away from the stove and smiled at them both.

"Curtis, I see you found your friend."

"Yes, I did, thanks for making him so comfortable. Jim needs a place to stay tonight. Do you have anything?"

"Just one night?" She met Jim's eyes.

"Maybe longer." Jim shrugged.

"Let's just start with one night. I'll even cover it for you, Jim. You can add it to my bill, Suzie."

"You don't need to do that, Curtis." Jim frowned. "I can cover my own."

"I insist. You've come all of this way just to see me. It's the least

I could do."

"All right, thank you." Jim nodded.

"If you need to stay for longer, just let me know when you know." Suzie smiled. "I'll get a room ready for you right after dinner. You're welcome to join us."

"Thanks so much," Jim said.

"We'll be eating in about two hours."

"That's long enough for me to show you the beach. You're not going to believe how clear the water is here." Curtis smiled.

"Great, let's go have a look."

"Oh Jim, do you have any luggage?" Suzie called out before the two men could reach the door.

"Just this bag." He pointed to the small bag on the floor. "I travel light."

"Anything you might need you can borrow from me. You know what's mine is yours." Curtis grinned.

"Sure, I know that." Jim nodded.

"You can leave it in my room if you want," Curtis offered.

"It's okay, I'll take it with me." Jim smiled. "It has my swimming stuff in it."

"I still have those ropes I borrowed from you."

The two disappeared through the front door. Suzie glanced at her watch. She now needed to get two rooms ready and make sure that dinner was on the table. She was just about to go to the linen closet when Mary stepped out of the living room and caught her arm.

"What are you up to?"

"I was going to make up a room for Ben, and our new guest."

"A new guest?"

"Yes, Jim, a friend of Curtis'."

"Well, just make up one, okay? I'd rather Ben stay with Rick. It'll keep things, well you know, separated."

"By things do you mean your adult daughter and her boyfriend?" Suzie raised an eyebrow.

"I just mean, things." Mary grimaced. "I might not be as modern as I like to think I am."

"Okay, no problem. I'm sure Ben won't mind. Have you had a chance to talk to him alone?"

"No, not really. Why? Is something wrong?"

"I just think that you should talk to him. Don't tell him I said

anything, but I think it's important."

"Okay, I will. Thanks for the heads up, Suzie."

"Always. Now get back in there and enjoy your kids."

"We're all going to go for a walk on the beach. I want them to soak up as much of this beauty as they can."

"Good idea."

"I'll be back in time to help with dinner."

"Don't you dare, I've got it. As far as I'm concerned, you're on vacation."

"Suzie, now we have almost a full house, you can't handle that alone."

"If I need you, I will let you know, I promise."

"All right." Mary hugged her, then joined the others as they walked towards the door. "I still haven't heard from the locksmith!"

"Okay, I'll see what I can do." Suzie opened the door to the linen closet and pulled out some fresh sheets. Then she grabbed a basket of cleaning supplies and headed for one of the empty rooms. As a rule they cleaned a room after a guest left, but they also cleaned it before a guest checked in if it was vacant for more than a week, as on some occasions the rooms were empty long enough for dust to settle.

She made her way up to the third floor because it had the best views. It had three bedrooms and an additional bathroom. She opened the door to the first room and stepped inside. It hadn't been cleaned that long ago so the floors were still nice. She made the bed with fresh sheets and pillowcases. That was enough to work up a sweat. She opened the window to let some fresh air into the room. For a moment she paused and gazed out over the ocean. The green-blue surface stretched out so far that she grew dizzy at the sight of it. Somewhere out there, Paul was on his boat, maybe thinking about her. She smiled at the thought. When she spotted Curtis and Jim on the beach she was reminded that she had a lot to get done.

Suzie focused her attention on the rest of the room and made sure there wasn't a speck of dust left. Once she was sure that everything was ready she stepped out of the room and locked it behind her. When she reached the ground floor she headed straight to the kitchen and started preparing dinner. While Mary had a knack for cooking it took her quite a bit of concentration to keep things from boiling over or burning. As the kitchen began to fill with the aroma of the food she heard the sound of footsteps on the

stairs. Hal and Trish reached the bottom and paused near the kitchen.

"Hi. How are you two doing? Do you need anything for the room?" Suzie asked.

"No, everything's fine." Hal frowned.

"Are you joining us for dinner?" Suzie smiled at Hal.

"No." He narrowed his eyes. "I think we'll have dinner in town tonight."

"Oh why? It smells delicious!" Trish exclaimed.

"You know why. Let's go." He gripped her arm rather firmly and steered her away from the kitchen.

Suzie bit into her bottom lip as she heard the two biting back and forth at each other. As much as she didn't like to witness the fight, there was nothing that was too harsh said between them. She hoped that it stayed that way or improved.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

Suzie set the table with the dishes and silverware. Then she checked on the food in the oven again. As she closed the oven door, she heard the front door swing open and voices travel through the entrance.

“I’m telling you right now, there’s money to be made in it. If you would consider investing, you and I could both be rich.”

“I don’t know, Jim. I’m not looking to make any big investments right now. I just got the dive shack opened up, and I haven’t even turned a profit yet.”

“But it’ll be worth it.” Jim clapped him on the shoulder as they walked into the dining room. “Just think about it, that’s all I’m asking.”

“All right, I will. Suzie, that smells amazing.” Curtis grinned at her as he pulled out a chair. “I’m starving.”

“Good, because there is plenty, and I expect you to have seconds at least.”

“Seconds, guaranteed.” Curtis chuckled.

“Me too!” Jim rubbed his stomach as he sat down beside Curtis.

The front door swung open again and Mary, along with her children, and Rick, stepped inside. While Mary introduced them to Curtis and Jim, Suzie brought the food out to the table. Soon they were all enjoying her attempt at pasta with a creamy chicken sauce.

“This is delicious, Suzie.” Mary smiled.

“Thanks Mary.” Suzie smiled back at her, though she doubted her friend was being completely honest about the taste. “Cathy, Ben, have you asked Curtis about diving lessons?”

“Oh, are you interested?” Curtis looked up as he swiped a piece of bread across his plate.

“Yes, absolutely.” Cathy grinned.

“I’d like to check it out.” Ben nodded.

“I’m already certified.” Rick draped his arm along the back of Cathy’s chair. “But I’d love for Cathy to learn so we can dive together.”

“Great. We can get together for a lesson first thing tomorrow, does that sound okay to you?” Curtis asked.

“That would be great.” Cathy nodded.

“About eight.” He agreed. “The water should be warm enough by then.”

“Thanks. It’s not too last minute?” Cathy asked.

“Not at all. My schedule is pretty clear tomorrow.”

“Okay, wonderful. We’ll be there.” Cathy nudged her brother with her elbow. “If he’s brave enough that is.”

“Oh, I’ll be there all right.” Ben shot a glare in her direction. “We’ll see who goes in first.”

“All right, it’s not a competition.” Curtis grinned. “It is best to have a healthy sense of caution. Diving can be dangerous. Am I right, Jim?” He nodded his head at his friend.

“Yes, that’s for sure.” Jim frowned. “Remember Bermuda?”

“That’s just what I was thinking of, actually.”

“What happened in Bermuda?” Suzie leaned closer. “I love a good story.”

“I don’t know if you could say that it was good. It was dangerous, and we were young, and stupid,” Curtis said.

“Well, I was young, you were just stupid.” Jim grinned.

“We both went down there, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we did.” Jim glanced around the table as everyone stared at him. “We were after treasure, how could we resist?”

“Treasure? Real treasure?” Ben’s eyes widened.

“Sure. Left behind in a Spanish shipwreck. The dive was so dangerous that we had to go in secret, otherwise the authorities would have arrested us for trying. But we did it anyway.” Curtis shook his head. “We came this close to running out of oxygen before we hit the surface.” He held his fingers an inch apart. “A few minutes longer, and we would have both been dead.”

“I haven’t forgotten, Curtis, you were the one that pulled me up. Once I spotted the shipwreck, I wasn’t going to turn back. I’m grateful to you every day for that, brother, you saved my life.”

“The important thing is that we both made it out of there, which I can’t say for other people that tried.”

“Wow. But you actually found the shipwreck?” Ben scooted his chair forward. “Did you see the treasure?”

“No.” Jim shrugged. “We didn’t get close enough. The shipwreck was just too deep. It’s impossible to get down there.”

“So, the treasure could still be there? Wow!”

“I think the moral of the story, Ben, is that these two almost lost their lives chasing after that treasure. It wasn’t worth it, was it guys?” Mary looked between Curtis and Jim.

“No, it wasn’t.” Jim frowned. “Was it Curtis?” He locked eyes with him.

“As tempting as it is to think of riches and wealth, the greatest treasure is having your life.”

“Curtis is absolutely right.” Mary smiled. “Which is why I trust him to teach you how to dive tomorrow. But you will be extra careful, right?”

“Absolutely.” Ben smiled and took another bite of his food.

As the discussion continued Suzie thought about Hal and Trish. She hoped they’d had a good dinner and that the issues between them and Curtis didn’t escalate. Luckily Hal and Trish would be leaving in a few days. At least that would prevent any drama from growing. After dinner Mary started clearing the dishes.

“No ma’am, that’s my job.” Suzie plucked the plates right out of her hands.

“Suzie! You have to let me help a little bit.”

“I do not. You know telling me what to do never does any good.”

“That’s a good point, but you must be exhausted from everything today.”

“I’m not really, I’m fine.” She paused. “I am concerned about Hal and Trish though.”

“Why is that?”

“There seems to be an issue between them and Curtis.”

“Oh.” Mary placed a hand over her lips and nodded.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.” Mary picked up another plate.

Suzie took it from her hand and raised an eyebrow. “Oh no you’re not getting away with that this time. You know something, so spill.”

“Fine, I will, if you spill what Ben told you.”

“He didn’t mention anything?”

“No, he didn’t. I want to know what’s going on with him.”

“Mary, you know I can’t break his confidence. I wouldn’t feel right about it, and if you’re honest with yourself, you wouldn’t feel right about it either.”

“Yes, you’re right I wouldn’t. It’s just driving me crazy not to know.”

“He’ll tell you when he’s ready. If I thought he was in any danger I would tell you right away, you know that.”

“I know.” She sighed. “I’m glad he talked to you.”

“So, are you going to spill?”

“It’s just that I saw something the other night.”

“Saw what?” Suzie gave up on trying to prevent Mary from clearing the table, and allowed her to carry a few glasses to the sink as they talked.

“I don’t like to spread gossip, you know that, and I believe in people’s privacy, but since this issue seems to be growing, I guess I should tell you.”

“Yes, you should.” Suzie raised an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“I saw Trish on the beach, and I was going to say hello to her, but she walked right up to Curtis. He was fishing, and didn’t notice her at first I guess. She stood there behind him for a moment, then stepped up beside him. She tapped him on the shoulder, and when he turned, she kissed him.”

“What? She didn’t say anything to him?”

“Not that I saw.”

“So she just walked up to him and kissed him?”

“That’s what it looked like to me, but I was far away. Maybe I missed something.”

“What did he do?”

“I don’t know. When I saw that I ducked back into the house. I didn’t want them to know that I saw. I thought that would be awkward.”

“Very.” Suzie sighed. “This could prove more troublesome than I thought. Maybe I will talk to Curtis about it.”

“What are you going to do, say ‘oh by the way please refrain from kissing our married guests’?”

“I don’t know.” Suzie shrugged. “We don’t want guests that are causing problems, especially long term guests.”

“Maybe it’s Trish that caused the problem.” Mary pursed her lips. “She’s the one who walked up to him.”

“That may be true, but Curtis should know better.”

“Not everyone has the same set of morals though, that’s something that I’m having to learn to accept.” Mary frowned.

“Good point. I’ll see if I can bring it up in a less intrusive way.”

“Or maybe just let it rest for a day or two. They are leaving soon.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it. Now off with you, you’re not washing a single dish.”

“But I could dry…”

“No! Go be with your kids.” She picked up a towel and snapped it in Mary’s direction. “Now, I say!”

“Sorry, you’re still not scary.” Mary laughed as she walked out of the kitchen.

“Poor Hal,” Suzie muttered to herself as she began to wash the dishes. She really had no idea how to approach Curtis about the issue. Was it even her place to? She could let it go as Mary suggested, but what if things grew more tense and a fight broke out? Without Jason around to help them out, they would have to turn to Kirk Rondella, Jason’s partner on the police force, who wasn’t nearly as flexible. He used to be in the army and was quite new to Garber. Suzie decided that she would leave it for the moment, but if it caused any problems she would speak to Curtis.

After Suzie went to bed that night she could hear Jim moving around in the room above hers. Something scraped across the floor. She wondered what it was, and did her best to ignore it. When the room became stuffy she opened her window halfway and heard Mary’s voice drift up towards her. One glance down at the wraparound porch revealed that she was outside with Ben. She sighed with relief as she tucked herself back into bed. Maybe Ben would come clean.

Mary reached out and patted her son's knee. "You know there's nothing that you can't tell me, right?"

"I know, Ma."

"Do you?" She looked into his eyes. "Life is hard, Ben. I get that. Being an adult, well it's not the greatest thing in the world, is it?"

"No." He sat back in the wooden deck chair. "It's not."

"So tell me, maybe I can help."

"Suzie talked to you, huh?"

"She only said that you needed to talk to me. She didn't tell me anything about why."

"All right, I guess it's better to get it out now. You're going to find out eventually."

"What is it?"

"I'm failing in school. I wasn't making ends meet, so I took on an extra job, I didn't think it would be a big deal, but I ended up being exhausted. I fell asleep in class a couple of times, the teacher got upset. So I ditched the extra job, but the bills keep coming in and…"

"But I send you money every month, it isn't enough?"

"I screwed up. I owe some people some money."

"What do you mean?" She studied him. "Tell me the details."

"I wanted to get a new computer, and some other things. I needed some extra cash. What you send me is a lot, but I just got caught up in this lifestyle. Most of my friends there are pretty well off, and they could always just get whatever they wanted. One of them suggested I go to his friend for a loan, just so I could get a few things, and then I could pay him off when your check came. But that's not what happened. I went to this guy for a loan, and he seemed nice enough, but it turned out he wasn't just friendly, he was doing this as a business. After he gave me the money he started hitting me up for interest, I had to give him my whole check from you. That's when I picked up the second job. But then the guy wanted more money, he said it wasn't enough. I was going to go to the police, but this guy is a real sketchy person. I'm just not sure what to do. He just keeps asking me for more. I've already paid him double what I borrowed."

"Ben. You should have told me about all of this from the beginning."

"I know." He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "I know. I thought I could handle it. Every time I thought I had it

handled, something would change. I know I should have just talked to you or Dad, but I wanted to see if I could fix it myself. I think the only way to fix it is to leave college."

"The only way you can fix this is if you bring up your grades. You're not leaving college."

"Mom."

"Ben, I mean it."

"I thought you said I could tell you about anything?"

"Yes, you can, but this is non-negotiable. You have to finish your education."

"The thing is, he knows where I live, in the dorms. Even if I pay him, he'll always be able to find me. I thought maybe dropping out would be the best idea. He'll forget all about me, and I can go back to school in a couple of years."

"That's not right. We're going to get the police involved in this."

"Mom, you can't. I have no idea what he'll do."

"Let me think about it. I'll figure something out. In the meantime, don't ever let yourself go without and land up in trouble. You could have asked me for extra money."

"I didn't want to have to tell you what I did, how stupid I was. I just wanted to be an adult and handle things."

"Sweetheart, being an adult doesn't always make you able to handle things. Trust me, I've been an adult for a long time, and I've faced a lot of bad situations. I don't always make the right decision, no one does. But you have someone to turn to when that happens, never forget that."

"I just don't want to put any extra pressure on you."

"You're not. I want to help you. We'll figure this out, together." She patted his knee again. "But not tonight. Let me sleep on it."

"Okay." He stood up, and turned back to offer her a hand.

"It's okay, I'm okay." As Mary pushed herself to her feet she did her best to hide the pain that washed through her knees. Lately it seemed to be getting worse. While Suzie was spry and always up to any physical challenge, Mary often felt that she'd aged beyond her years.

"Have you been to the doctor?"

"Yes honey, it's okay, it's just a bit of arthritis."

"It seems like more than that."

"It's not. Sometimes it's just been a long day, and I'm ready to rest."

“All right.” He kissed her cheek and walked her to her room. As she closed the door to her bedroom, she leaned on it for support. It wasn’t her knees that threatened to make her collapse, it was the thought of her son caught up in such a dangerous situation. How hadn’t she known? Why did he think he needed to prove something to her by handling the situation all on his own? None of it made sense. She’d always tried to make herself completely available to her children. Maybe Dune House had distracted her, and she just didn’t notice the change in him? She fell asleep, still troubled by what Ben revealed.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

Just as the sun peeked past the horizon, Suzie made her way into the kitchen. She expected to start the coffee, but heard the machine lid snap shut. There in the shadows, Mary turned the switch on the coffee pot and it began to brew.

"Morning Suzie."

"Morning. I guess we're both early risers today."

"Yes." Mary leaned back against the counter and frowned. "I had some trouble sleeping."

"Uh oh. Did Ben talk to you?"

"Yes, and I have no idea what to do."

"What's going on? He didn't tell me any details."

"He's gotten himself into trouble with some kind of loan shark. I'm not sure what to think at this point. He wants to drop out to get away from this guy who just keeps coming after him for more money."

"Why don't we have Jason look into it when he gets back?"

"Ben doesn't want me to, but I think I will. I'm not sure what Jason can do since it's out of his jurisdiction."

"That's true but maybe he can give us some advice about how to legally get Ben out of the situation."

"That's a good idea." Mary shook her head. "I think the thing that I'm upset about the most, is that he didn't come to me right away when he needed money instead of going to someone else. He says it was because he was trying to handle things as an adult. But I think it's because he worries about me."

"It's probably a little of both. He's a good young man, Mary. He'll get all of this straightened out, and everything will be fine."

"I sure hope so."

"What are your plans today?"

“Well, the kids have their lesson with Curtis, then afterwards I’m going to take them shopping. What about you?”

“It’s supposed to be a nice morning. I’m going to work on decorating the front porch. I want to add a few splashes of color and stain some of the chairs that we have out there.”

“Okay, do you want any help with it?” Mary asked.

“No thanks, I can handle it. Did the kids already go down to the beach to meet Curtis?”

“Not yet. I don’t think they’re up yet. But Curtis must already be down there. I didn’t even see him leave this morning, but there is a light on in the shack.”

“I’m going to have my coffee on the porch. Do you want to join me?”

“Yes, in a bit. I’ll just wait for Cathy and Ben so they can have a coffee and bagel before they go diving. I doubt they’ll want a big breakfast.”

“Okay, I’ll make breakfast for the others when they are up then I’ll make a start on these projects. Oh, and if we don’t hear from that locksmith today, then we need to call someone else. If Jason was here he’d fix it right up for us.”

“So would Wes. Maybe we should ask Kirk?” Mary raised an eyebrow. “He might be willing to help.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know Kirk that well, and though he seems like a good guy, I’m not so sure Jason would like us asking his partner for favors.”

“All right, then let’s just hope that the locksmith comes through today.”

“If he doesn’t, we can ask Paul when he docks. It is a bit of an inconvenience with the door being jammed.”

Suzie headed out onto the back porch. A few minutes later Cathy made her way down the stairs.

“Morning Mom.”

“Morning sweetie. Do you want some coffee and a bagel before you head out?”

“Sure.” Cathy grabbed a mug from the cabinet. “You’re up early.”

“Oh, I’m usually up this early. I like to have a little time before the guests get up to tidy up, get some coffee brewing and enjoy the view.”

“I can see why. This is a very beautiful place, Mom. Every time I

visit it seems to get more beautiful."

"Yes, I honestly love it here."

"I'm glad. I was worried about you after the divorce."

"No need to worry, I'm okay now." Mary smiled. "Remember, it's my job to worry about you, not the other way around."

"I can worry a little, too."

"Just a little though." Mary filled Cathy's mug with coffee and handed her a buttered bagel. "What about Rick? Is he just a boyfriend, or do you think he might be something more?"

"I'm in love with him, if that's what you mean. I'm just not so sure how he feels about me. It all happened so fast."

"Fast?"

"Yes, we met in class, and then we started spending every day together. When I decided to come here for a visit, he asked to come along so that he could meet you. That surprised me. Most young men want to avoid that kind of commitment so soon, right? But he was eager to meet you. I guess that's a good sign."

"It depends on the man." Mary smiled. "Maybe Rick is smart enough to see what an amazing woman he's with, and he doesn't want to take the chance of losing you. He's impressed me so far. But make sure you're taking the time to really get to know him. He certainly seems to be very fond of you."

"Maybe." She blushed as she glanced away. "I can see a life with him. But it's a bit earlier than I expected. I thought I'd finish school before I even thought about marriage."

"You still can." Mary looked into her eyes. "A relationship is not about giving up your freedom or your choices, Cathy. If he loves you, he will wait until you're ready for more. Finish school, find your passion, and if the relationship is still going strong, then you will know it's worth considering marriage."

"Thanks Mom." She hugged her. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Cathy, are you ready to go?" Ben bounded into the kitchen. Mary smiled as his mannerisms still reminded her of the little boy that would run from room to room. He broke her rule about no running in the house because he simply could not walk. He ran everywhere, and she decided that it was not a battle that she needed to win.

"Yes, just grabbed a cup of coffee," Cathy said.

"Ben?" Mary held up the pot.

"No way, that stuff is toxic." He grabbed a small can out of the

refrigerator.

“Sure, and that energy drink is full of all kinds of healthy things,” Cathy said.

“At least it isn’t ruining the environment,” Ben said.

“You two don’t start squabbling this early. Here’s a bagel, Ben,” Mary said as she handed it to him.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Go and have fun. Here, Cathy, take Curtis a bagel and a cup of coffee, too.” She poured some coffee into a travel mug and handed it and a bagel over to Cathy. “Please be careful. I trust Curtis, but still, be careful.”

“We will, Mom, don’t worry.” Ben kissed her cheek. Mary walked out with them through the front door. Then she made her way around to the side porch to watch as they raced each other down the beach. She was surprised at just how early Curtis got up. He was always up early. She liked that about him. Most young people she knew wasted the morning. It could be such a peaceful and reflective time.

“Can I join you?” She paused beside the table where Suzie was seated.

“Of course you can, I’ve been waiting for you. I see that Cathy and Ben are up.”

“Yes, they’re already squabbling, too. I really thought that was something they would grow out of, I can’t believe they’re still at each other’s throats.”

“Just be glad that they’re not coming to blows.” Suzie laughed. “That would be a problem.”

“That’s for sure. I got more than one bruise pulling those two apart as kids. I guess since they’re so close in age they fight about everything.”

“That or they’re two strong-willed, intelligent people that are just as stubborn as their mother.”

“Ouch.” Mary laughed.

“Oh, you can play that sweet and docile role all you want, I remember the days when you would have knocked out anyone that challenged you.”

“Knocked out is a bit strong.” Mary grinned. “True, but strong.”

“Oops, I’d better watch myself.” Suzie laughed and looked out over the water. “I know we’ve both been through some hard times, but I’m so glad that we ended up here, like this. I never imagined it,

but now I can't imagine living any other way."

"Me neither." Mary bit into her bottom lip. "Does that mean you're not going to marry Paul and move out?"

"What?" Suzie almost choked on her coffee. "Why would you have that idea?"

"I don't know, you two have gotten so close and he's always away…"

"And I like it that way. You know I don't want to get married," Suzie said. "I enjoy Paul, I would even go so far as to say that I'm fond of him, but our relationship works because we have space. I miss him when he's gone, I like missing him. It's better than being irritated that he's constantly underfoot."

"I see your point." Mary sipped her coffee. "But I imagine in another ten years or so he'll retire."

"He may." Suzie shrugged as she tucked her brassy blond hair behind her ear. "But a lot can happen in that time."

"That's true."

"I'm going to get breakfast ready, I'll make you something delicious, too."

"Oh good, I'm starving. With all the excitement my appetite is crazy."

"That's a good thing."

"If you say so." Mary patted her rounded belly.

"I do." Suzie winked at her, then walked back around the house to the front door. She reached the kitchen in time to see Trish reach the bottom of the stairs.

"Good morning, Trish, there's some coffee if you'd like some."

"Yes, that would be great." Trish sighed and followed her into the kitchen. Suzie poured her a mug, then turned to hand it to her. When she saw Trish's face she was startled by how swollen and red her eyes were.

"Trish, are you all right?"

"Yes, I guess." She frowned. "I'm sorry, I know I'm a mess. Hal and I had a fight."

"He seems to have a bit of a temper."

"He really doesn't. But ever since we've been here, he hasn't been himself."

"Why do you think that is? Isn't he comfortable here with us?"

"Oh no, it's not you, not at all. Honestly, it's Curtis. Hal has a jealous streak. I tried to tell him that there was nothing to worry

about, but he got so mad, and took off this morning. I have no idea where he went."

"It might be good for him to go somewhere and cool off. I'm so sorry that this is weighing on your time here."

"It's my fault really. I probably took things a little too far with Curtis. I'm getting older, and it's nice when a young man pays attention to me."

"It sounds like it's all a misunderstanding. Maybe if Hal and Curtis just talked about it…"

"No, I don't think that's a good idea. Hal already has it in his head that somehow I'm plotting against him. I think once we go home, everything will smooth out. We might end up leaving tomorrow instead of the next day, just so that we can get all of this straightened out."

"Well, that's a shame, but I understand. If there's anything I can do to help just let me know."

"Thanks Suzie. You really have done a great job of making us feel welcome. Hal is just out of sorts."

"If he does anything to hurt you…"

"He would never do anything like that. He has a loud bark, but zero bite."

"Sometimes people surprise you."

"That's true, but not Hal. He's just wound up because he's protective of me, and has always had this strange fear of losing me. I've tried to reassure him over the years, but it's never changed. Thanks for the coffee."

"I'm making breakfast."

"I'm not hungry, I'm sorry. I have no idea when Hal will be back either."

"Okay. There is plenty of food in the refrigerator if you get hungry later."

"Thanks Suzie."

As Trish walked away, Suzie wondered about what Mary saw on the beach. Was it possible that Trish was trying to make Hal jealous? The smell of smoke distracted her from her thoughts as the oil began to burn in the frying pan. She began to pour pancake batter into the frying pan. A few minutes later Mary stepped inside.

"Oh, that smells delicious."

"Well, I hope your appetite is still good because it's just going to be us, Jim and Rick."

“Speaking of.” Rick grinned as he walked into the kitchen. “Good morning, ladies.”

“Morning.” Mary smiled at him. “Cathy’s already gone down for her lesson.”

“I know, I’m going to head down soon to see if I can observe.”

“Please eat a pancake first, no one else wanted breakfast.” Suzie grinned as she flipped a pancake.

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything.” He laughed. Jim came down the stairs next. His hair was ruffled as if he’d just woken up.

“Morning Jim. Are you hungry?” Suzie began to slide pancakes onto a plate.

“Sure. Thanks.” He sat down beside Rick. “So you didn’t join in on the lesson?”

“No, as I said yesterday I’m already a trained diver.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m in college at the moment.” He smiled. “And you?”

“I guess you could say I’m a traveler.” Jim laughed. “I travel all over the world to abseil, dive, and take on jobs in-between.”

“That sounds like a very interesting life.” Suzie sat down at the table with a plate of pancakes for everyone to choose from.

“It is. It’s adventurous, that’s for sure.”

“Rick, how did you become a qualified diver?” Mary looked across the table at him.

“I was in the navy for a short time.” He picked up his water and took a long swallow.

“Why so short?” Jim stabbed his pancakes with his fork.

“Uh, it was complicated. Let’s just say, I didn’t meet their needs. But I did learn how to dive.” He smiled and shrugged. Mary narrowed her eyes. She couldn’t help but wonder why her daughter’s boyfriend would be kicked out of the navy. Was that even possible?

“Well, I’m sure Cathy and Ben are having a great time.” Suzie smiled as she steered the conversation in a new direction.

“Yes, I’m going to go check on them then maybe head into town for a bit. Thanks for breakfast.” Rick left the table.

“Oh Jim, I need to get your information for the room registration. I know that Curtis is covering the bill, but I still need to have your information in the system.”

“Oh sure. I’ll bring my wallet down in a little while. I’ve got some research to do, so I’m going to do it on my phone in my

room."

"There's a local library that's great for that if you're interested. Curtis goes there a lot. The librarian, Louis is a research guru."

"Interesting. I'll keep that in mind. Thanks." Jim headed back upstairs.

"Okay, now I am cleaning this up and I won't hear a single argument from you." Mary pointed a finger at Suzie. "The kids won't be done with their lesson for a while, and I need something to keep my mind busy."

"All right, fine. But just this once." Suzie grinned as she stepped out through the back door. She went to the shed to get the supplies she needed. Then she set up shop on the front porch. As she began to select which furniture she wanted to stain, she immersed herself in the work.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

Mary finished the breakfast dishes, then began to cut some vegetables for lunch. She hummed under her breath as she worked.

“Cathy does that, too.”

She jumped at the sound of Rick’s voice and turned to look at him. “Oh, I didn’t know you were there.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. It’s just, now I see where she gets it from. Whenever she’s working on something, she hums.”

“Oops, I guess I gave her my bad habit.” Mary laughed.

“I don’t think it’s bad at all.” He plucked a slice of pepper off the cutting board. “Do you mind?”

“No, go ahead.”

“I’m just heading out. I’m going to explore the area a little.”

“When the kids get back, and after they’ve rested if they want to, I’m going to take everyone down to the local shops. There are very nice places to browse.”

“Oh great, I’m looking forward to that. I’ll make sure I stay close by.”

“If you need anything just give me a call.”

“Thanks.” Rick hesitated. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure what I should call you.”

“Mary is fine.” She offered him a warm smile.

“Thanks Mary.”

After he left she returned to chopping the vegetables. She did like how polite he was. She could only hope that charm was genuine.

Just before lunch the door swung open and Cathy stepped inside.

“Cathy!” Mary smiled at her. “How did it go?”

“It was great. I learned so much. I can’t wait to go diving with

Rick. It'll be fun."

"Do you feel like you are ready to go out on your own?"

"No, not on my own, but with Rick there I'll be just fine. I think the hardest part is trying to figure out the equipment. Curtis made it seem so simple, but I don't know if I'd trust that I got it just right."

"I can understand that fear. I think you're brave enough just for going down there. Did you see anything amazing?"

"I saw things I never could have imagined and if you told me they were real, I would have argued the point. I had no idea what was swimming in the water before. I know that you're not interested in doing it, but if you ever wanted to, it would be worth it just to see the magnificent creatures."

"I think I'll stick to pictures, and the descriptions you give."

"I don't blame you." Cathy grinned. "When we turned around to surface and I realized how deep we were I almost panicked. Luckily Curtis was there to guide me."

"What about Ben? How did he handle it? Where is he anyway?"

"He liked it, too. I think he chased after some girls on the beach. He's gotten to be a bit of a flirt."

"Ugh, I don't think I want to know that."

"Don't worry, Mom, he's a good guy. He's just excited to have a girlfriend."

"Girlfriends, boyfriends." Mary shook her head. "I remember when you both were in diapers."

"Mom!"

"All right, I'm sorry." Mary laughed. "I know that you're both grown up, and I'm happy that you can be with people that make you happy."

"Speaking of that, have you seen Rick?"

"He went out about a half hour ago. He said he wouldn't be far. I told him I wanted to go shopping this afternoon. After lunch."

"Hmm, maybe he texted me." She rummaged in her purse for her phone. After she checked it she shook her head. "No texts."

"Maybe he just ran to the store for something. He said he wanted to explore."

"It's odd for him to go without me."

"It seems your brother is occupied, so I guess he's not going to want to go out. What about you?"

"I don't know, Mom. I think I'd rather just lay down for a little

while. That adventure wore me out. Plus, I want to wait for Rick to get back. Then we could all go out together."

"Okay. Are you ready for some lunch?"

"I could eat." She grinned.

"Okay, go rest for about fifteen minutes, then everything should be ready."

"Thanks, Mom."

As Mary began to set out plates for all of the guests, she smiled at the thought of what came next for her family. Would there be weddings? Grandchildren? Sure, she wouldn't want either of her children to rush into things. Those events were still years down the line, but she took pleasure in the thought of them. Once lunch was ready she rang the bell to announce it. Trish and Jim came downstairs, and a few minutes later Cathy followed. Mary stuck her head out on to the front porch and smiled at Suzie.

"Time to take a break and have some lunch."

"What do you think?" Suzie stepped aside from one of the rocking chairs she'd stained.

"Wow, that's beautiful. It's the perfect color. I love light blue."

"Thanks." Suzie sighed and wiped her hand across her forehead. "It was a bit more of a project than I expected. I'll go wash up."

"Come eat." She opened the door for Suzie and started to follow her, but froze when she saw Ben run up the porch steps towards her. His expression caused her heart to drop. Something terrible had happened.

"Mom! Mom!" Ben ran up to her, covered in sand, his cheeks red from exertion.

"Ben, what is it? What's wrong?"

"It's Curtis! He just washed up on the beach!"

"What?" Mary's chest heaved as she tried to make sense of what her son said. "What are you talking about?"

"I was walking down the beach and I saw all kinds of flashing lights. When I got close enough, I saw him on the beach. It's Curtis, and he's dead, Mom. He's dead!"

"Oh Ben!" She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close. As strong as he was, she could feel him quake in her grasp.

"I just saw him this morning, Mom. How could he be dead?"

"Maybe there's some mistake."

"No, there's no mistake, I saw him myself. He still had his diving equipment on."

“Oh, how horrible.” Mary fought back tears as she hugged her son again. “I’m so sorry that you saw that.”

“Let’s just go inside, Mom, I don’t want to think about it anymore.”

“All right, come on in.” She stared down the beach in the direction her son ran from. In the distance she could see the glimmer of flashing lights. When she opened the door to Dune House she found Rick and Cathy snuggled together on the couch. He must have returned at some point, and she didn’t notice. “Suzie! Suzie?”

“She just went out through the back. I think she was going to lock up the shed. Ben, what’s wrong? Mom? You’re white as a sheet!”

“It’s Curtis!” Ben blurted out the words as he stumbled further into the room. “They just found him on the beach. Dead.”

“Dead?” Cathy jumped up from the couch. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I saw him.” Ben wiped at his eyes.

“How could this happen?” Cathy shuddered. Rick stood up and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“Accidents do happen, Cathy. Diving can be dangerous,” Rick said.

“But Curtis was an expert. How could something like this happen to him?” Cathy shook her head.

Mary walked through the kitchen to the back door. She spotted Suzie fighting with the lock on the shed. “Suzie! Come in, I need to tell you something.”

“Just a second, this lock is stuck.”

“Suzie, please, you have to come inside now!”

Suzie let go of the lock and turned to look at her. “What is it, Mary?” She jogged up to the back door and Mary led her into the house.

“Curtis is dead. They found him on the beach. I’m not sure what’s happened yet, but I know that he is dead.”

“Oh, that’s terrible! I can’t believe it’s true.” Suzie’s eyes filled with tears. “He was so young, and such a nice person! How could this happen?”

“The police are down there now, trying to figure that out.” Mary frowned. “I wish Jason was here to handle this. I like Kirk, but I trust Jason.”

“I agree. But Kirk is the one that is here, so we’ll just have to see

how he handles it. I'm sure he'll do a good job." Suzie crossed her arms as she stared off into space for a moment. "Do you think it was an accident?"

"I would assume it could only be. Maybe he dove too long, or maybe he had some kind of medical problem under the water."

"But he was so young and healthy. I doubt he could have had any medical problems."

"Maybe not but it's possible. Maybe drugs?" Mary frowned. "I hate to think he might have been using them, but maybe?"

"Maybe." Suzie sighed. "There's no point in guessing. I'm sure the police will be along to collect his things from his room. What a terrible, terrible, thing." Suzie clutched the slope of her neck. "Have you told the kids yet?"

"Yes, they already know. Ben saw him."

"Poor thing. I'm sorry this happened, Mary. I know you were looking forward to having a great time with the kids, and now it seems that might not happen."

"I just can't believe that Curtis is gone."

"Neither can I." Suzie blinked and shook her head. "It seems impossible. I'm going to walk down there and find out what's happening."

"All right, maybe that's a good idea." Mary wrung her hands. "I have no idea what to do."

"Just stay with the kids. They need you right now."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

Suzie stepped out onto the front porch. When she saw the patrol car pull up in front of Dune House, she wasn't surprised. She was certain that Kirk would have some questions and want to take a look at Curtis' things, perhaps to contact next of kin.

When Kirk stepped out of the car his expression was grave. She studied him as he walked up the steps and onto the porch. There was something about his expression that made her uneasy. It was more than sorrow. Was it suspicion?

"Hi Suzie." He leaned against the railing and rested one hand on his hip. "I guess you've heard?"

"Yes, I have, what a tragedy." She shook her head. The screen door squeaked as Mary pushed it open and stepped out onto the porch as well.

"Kirk, how are you holding up?"

"I'm fine." He reached up and pulled off his hat to reveal his shaved head. He toyed with the brim as he looked at the two women. "I'm just trying to gather some information."

"What kind of information?" Suzie raised an eyebrow. "Do you want his things from his room?"

"No, actually I'd prefer it if everyone stays out of his room. The crime scene investigation team will be here in a little while. They're still at the beach so it will take them some time to get out here."

"Crime scene investigation team?" Mary's eyes widened. "Is that really necessary?"

"Yes, I think it is." He looked between them nervously.

"Kirk, what is it? Just come out with it already. I can tell you have something to say." Suzie crossed her arms and locked her eyes to his.

"All right then. I don't think this was an accident. I think it was

a murder."

"But wasn't he diving alone?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. We are waiting for the tests to confirm our suspicions, but from our initial investigations we believe that one of the cylinders that he had on was filled with something other than the oxygen mix used in diving tanks. He had two on. The first one was empty, I'm guessing, he did a long dive, then when the second one kicked in, whatever was inside killed him. They were new tanks. I contacted the company and they were delivered this morning. They were empty so he must have filled them this morning. I am certain an experienced diver would have checked his tanks to be sure they were filled properly. If he'd been close enough to the surface when he realized the problem, he would have been able to come up for air. It seems to me that someone wanted to make sure that he was deep enough that he had no chance. The tainted cylinder is almost completely empty." He narrowed his eyes. "There was no way he could have survived."

"There's no way Curtis would make a mistake like that." Suzie frowned. "He was impeccable with his equipment."

"So I've been told by a few of his students. Which is why I've come to the conclusion that there might be something far more sinister at play here. I will need to talk to both of you, as well as anyone else who is staying here."

"Of course. There's Trish and Hal, and Curtis' friend, Jim."

"And?" He looked over at Mary. "I was told that Curtis had some students this morning. Your son and daughter?"

"Well yes, but they're just here for a visit."

"If they had contact with the victim then I will need to talk with them." He set his jaw and held her gaze.

"Talk with them about what exactly?" Mary's voice grew tense.

"I want to get everyone's whereabouts to see who has an alibi and who doesn't first of all, and secondly I want to know if anyone noticed anything strange about Curtis this morning."

"Alibis?" Suzie narrowed her eyes. "Now that's a stretch. None of us would have anything to do with Curtis' death."

"I'm sure that you know it's just routine. Everyone who has had contact with the victim needs to be questioned. I know this is going to be uncomfortable, and you're used to Jason being more flexible…"

"Now, wait a minute, Jason always does his job." Suzie frowned.

“He just knows better than to waste his time accusing people who had nothing to do with a murder.” Mary shook her head. “My kids had nothing to do with any of this. They’re already shaken up.”

“Hold on, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m sorry they’re upset, but they’re part of this investigation. They may have been the last ones to see Curtis alive.” He straightened up and looked from one woman to the other. “I will do my job, understand? I have no interest in stepping on anyone’s toes. But if you’re not going to be cooperative then we are going to have a problem.”

“A problem?” Suzie clenched her teeth for a moment, then took a breath. “All right. Mary, he’s right. He’s just trying to do his job. It will be a few questions, and that will be that. Of course we want to help figure out what happened to Curtis. Have you been able to reach any family members?”

“I’m afraid not. From the background check I did on him, I haven’t found any living relatives, so there may not be any to find. In which case, I’m really going to need to gather as much information from you and Mary as possible. I know you don’t know me as well as Jason, but I can assure you that anything I investigate is going to be done by the book, and in the pursuit of justice.”

“That’s very reassuring, Kirk. I’m sure you’ll do a great job. Just try to remember that this has been very difficult for us as well. Curtis has been here for quite some time, and my kids just had a class with him this morning. Ben even saw him on the beach when he was pulled out of the water.” Mary winced and shook her head. “I’m sorry if I overreacted, this is emotional for me, too. We both really enjoyed having Curtis here.”

“Of course.” Kirk put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m not here to cause more distress. I want this solved, just like you do.”

“Just like we all do.” Suzie nodded.

“I’ll need to interview both of you as well.” Kirk looked from Mary to Suzie.

“Of course, come inside.” As Suzie stepped through the door with Mary right behind her, she noticed Trish approach from the stairs.

“What’s going on?” Trish looked at Suzie with wide eyes. “I saw the police car out front.”

Kirk stepped in behind Mary and pulled the door closed. “Did you know Curtis Malcolm?”

Trish looked between Suzie and Mary. “What’s happened?”

“Curtis is dead, Trish, they found him on the beach.” Mary frowned. “Kirk is here to investigate.”

“What? Curtis is dead?” Trish’s hand flew to her mouth to cover a gasp. “How?”

“It looks as if it was a homicide. I would like to ask you a few questions please?” Kirk gestured to the small study off the living room.

“Yes, of course. But I should tell my husband.” She began to type on her phone.

“Is he nearby?”

“I have no idea where he is. He took off this morning and…” Trish stopped mid-sentence. “I mean, I’m sure he just went to the store for something.”

“All right, let’s just get started. I’ll want to speak with him as well, when he’s available.” Kirk led her into the study and closed the door behind him.

“This is awful.” Mary peeked into the living room where Rick, Cathy, and Ben were gathered.

“I wonder if she’ll tell him?” Suzie crossed her arms. “About the kiss.”

“I didn’t even think about that. Hal was so angry with them both. What if he had something to do with this?”

“I don’t want to jump to any conclusions. But it’s possible. I doubt Trish is going to tell Kirk about any of it. We might have to be the ones to do it.”

“I’d hate to cause a problem if Hal wasn’t involved.”

“I would, too, but this isn’t about us, or Hal and Trish, it’s about Curtis.”

Mary nodded, then bit into her bottom lip.

“Someone has to tell Jim.” Suzie stood close to Mary. “I don’t think he should hear it from Kirk first. He may be a good police officer, but he’s not very delicate.”

“I haven’t seen him since breakfast. He went back upstairs after breakfast and he hasn’t come down since.”

“Do you think he’s okay?” Suzie asked.

“Well, he has to be up there, right? You haven’t seen him since breakfast have you?”

“No and I’ve been on the front porch all morning. I’ll go check on him.” Suzie started up the stairs, but just as she set her foot on the bottom step she saw Jim at the top of the stairs. “Jim. You

should come down here. Something terrible has happened."

"What is it?" He pounded down the rest of the stairs and paused at the bottom, just as Kirk stepped out of the study.

"Jim Smithsy?" Kirk locked eyes with the other man.

"Yes, I'm Jim. What is this about?" He frowned.

"I'm sorry to inform you of this. Your friend Curtis has passed away."

"What?" Jim grabbed the railing on the stairs and did his best to steady himself. Suzie grabbed his other arm to offer him some support.

"I'm so sorry, Jim."

"You two were friends for a long time?" Kirk studied him.

"Years." Jim straightened up and closed his eyes. "How did he die?"

"I believe he was murdered."

"You believe he was, or he was?" Jim stared at him.

"At this time there is evidence to support that there was foul play involved in his death. However, the investigation is ongoing."

"I don't understand. How can you not know if a person was murdered or not?"

"He died because of a problem with his equipment. Can you tell me where you were this morning between eight and twelve-thirty?"

"A problem with his equipment?" Jim shook his head. "I was here. I went back upstairs after breakfast, did some research and then I fell asleep. I just woke up a little while ago and heard the commotion."

"Suzie?" Kirk looked over at her. "Can you confirm that?"

"I was on the porch all morning, and Mary was in the kitchen. The lock on the side door is jammed so the door can't be opened. If Jim had left, I would have seen him go through the front, or Mary would have seen him go through the back."

"All right, thank you." He made a note, then looked back at Jim. "Do you mind if we talk for a few minutes? I'd like to know as much as I can about Curtis."

"Yes." Jim closed his eyes. "I'll tell you whatever I can. I can't believe he's dead. This is so surreal."

"I can assure you, Jim, I will do whatever has to be done to make sure that Curtis' killer is found. I'm very sorry for your loss." Kirk led Jim away from the staircase to the study. As he closed the door, Mary shivered.

“Poor man. He lost a good friend. I should check on the kids.”

“Yes.” Suzie nodded as Mary walked past her to the living room. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. Where was Hal? Had he tampered with Curtis’ equipment and then taken off? It made her very uncomfortable to think that she might have allowed a killer to stay under their roof. Getting the guest’s details didn’t really give them much information about them. That thought reminded her that she had never registered Jim in the computer system. She dismissed it as unimportant now. She doubted he would be staying long.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

Suzie couldn't stop thinking about Curtis. To distract herself she put a few things together in the kitchen and carried the tray out into the living room. Everyone stared at the crackers and cheese as if they might be foreign objects. Suzie set the tray down on the coffee table and sank down into a chair.

"I know this is going to be hard on all of you, but Kirk is going to want to speak to all of us. It's important that he has all of the information that we can give him, even if you don't think it's important," Mary said.

"Mom, I don't want to talk to a cop." Ben rubbed his hands along his knees and frowned.

"Ben, it's okay. We know Kirk, he's a good guy, and he'll treat everyone fairly."

"No." Ben looked into his mother's eyes. "What if I say something wrong?"

"It's not a test, Ben, you just tell the truth." Cathy rolled her eyes.

"Cathy, be nice. This is stressful for everyone," Mary said.

"It's okay, Ben," Cathy said. "There's nothing to worry about. It's not like you killed him."

"Of course I didn't." Ben scowled. "That doesn't mean I'm okay with being questioned by the police."

"Relax hon, I'll go in with you. With both of you." Mary looked at Cathy. "I think that would be best."

"Mom, it's not really necessary." Cathy sighed. "We're not little kids."

"I know that, but when it comes to something like this, it's just best to be cautious."

"Ben? Could I speak with you?" Kirk stood in the doorway of the

living room.

“I’m going to join him.” Mary stood up.

“That’s fine.” Kirk nodded. “Whatever makes you comfortable.”

Mary followed Ben into the study with Kirk and sat down beside him. She was relieved that Kirk hadn’t fought her on it.

“I don’t know what I can really tell you.” Ben shrugged.

“Sometimes there are details that can be helpful to the case, that seem unimportant to you. So first, I’d like to know where you were between eight and twelve-thirty.”

“From eight until a little after eleven we were with Curtis, taking his class.”

“We?” Kirk glanced up from his notepad.

“Me, and my sister Cathy. Curtis was fine when we left him.”

“What time do you think that was?”

“About eleven-fifteen, maybe? I wasn’t really paying attention to the time.”

“Okay, and where did you go after that?”

“I stayed out on the beach.” He cleared his throat. “I saw some girls I wanted to try to talk to.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Did you talk to them?”

“What does that matter?” Ben frowned.

“If you spoke to them, then I can check with them to solidify your alibi.”

“No, I didn’t talk to them. I was too shy.”

“Okay. What about anyone else? Did you speak to anyone who might be able to confirm your alibi?”

“I don’t need an alibi. I didn’t kill him.”

“Ben, I’m not accusing you. It’s just easier if I know where everyone was at what time. Just try to understand I’m here to help solve a crime not to cause problems.”

“All right, I’m sorry. No, I didn’t speak to anyone. I just walked around some. Then I got hungry and decided to come back here. As I was walking back, I saw Curtis being pulled out of the water.” He winced.

“What about the time that you spent with Curtis? Do you remember anything strange about it?”

“Strange how?”

“Anything. Was he frustrated, did he mention any problems he

was having, did anyone show up that wasn't supposed to be there?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't know." Ben frowned. "We were near the shore when some cylinders were dropped off and he just waved to the guy."

"If there's something you would like to tell me about Curtis, now is the time. I need as much information as I can get." Kirk leaned forward and tried to meet his eyes.

"It's okay, Ben, you can tell him the truth." Mary patted her son's hand.

"I don't know if it even matters. But during our lesson, before we got into the water, Curtis got a phone call. He seemed a little upset. He said that he was in the middle of a lesson and he didn't want to deal with whatever it was right then, and hung up the phone."

"Do you have any idea who he was talking to? A man, a woman? Did he say a name?"

"No. That's why I didn't know if I should mention it. He just went back to teaching us, but his demeanor changed. He wasn't laughing as much. I just figured someone got under his skin, but he tried to focus on the safety lesson he was giving us."

"It's good that you told me. I can check his phone records to see who called him." He made a note, then looked back at Ben. "I need you to be honest with me. Had you ever met Curtis before coming here to visit your mother?"

"No, I'd never met him before. He seemed like a nice guy though."

"During your lesson was there anything that came up between you and Curtis, or Curtis and your sister?"

"No, nothing at all. We had a good lesson. I enjoyed it, and so did Cathy."

"If you think of anything, anything at all, I want you to call me." He handed Ben a business card. "Even if it seems trivial, or unimportant, understand?"

"Yes." Ben nodded as he took the card and tucked it into his wallet. Kirk walked him to the door.

"Could you ask your sister to step in?"

"Sure, I will." He paused and looked at Mary. "Are you going to stay?"

"Yes." She met Kirk's eyes. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all." Kirk waited until Cathy stepped into the study. "Hi

Catherine, I just want to ask you a few questions about your time with Curtis."

"But I barely knew him." She sat down next to Mary and took her mother's hand. "I don't know how I can help."

"You might be able to remember something that could help us with the case. Was there anyone else in the water with you?"

"No, there was no one else out there with us."

"What about on the beach? Did you see anyone walking? Any joggers? Anyone else?"

"Oh well, just Hal."

"Hal? Trish's husband?" Kirk made a note.

"Yes, when we were about to go into the water he walked past. Curtis was in the middle of giving us an instruction when Hal muttered something, he turned around to look at him."

"What did Hal say?"

"I didn't hear it. I was almost under the water, and Ben already was."

"What did Curtis do?"

"He didn't do anything. He just stared at him for a minute, then got back to the lesson."

"Do you think Hal's comment upset him?"

"Maybe surprised him?" Cathy frowned. "I don't know for sure. He didn't say anything about it."

"What about anything else? Did Curtis talk to you about anything personal?"

"Nothing that would matter." Cathy shrugged.

"Let me be the judge of that." He leaned forward and looked into her eyes. "What did you and Curtis talk about?"

"Not much." Cathy glanced over at her mother.

"It's okay, honey. Tell him whatever you talked about. It's important not to leave out a single detail."

"Well, like I said, it's not important. I'm a History major in college, and he asked me if I had any knowledge about artifacts, ancient culture, that kind of thing."

"And that didn't strike you as odd?"

"Not really. He'd mentioned that he was a bit of a treasure hunter, most deep sea divers are I guess. I figured he was interested in understanding how to tell the age of things so he could value them. I arranged to meet him at the library this evening to go over some websites that I thought might be helpful."

“What time were you supposed to meet?”

“Around seven.” She took a deep breath. “I don’t know how someone can just be gone like this. I’m sorry, I just can’t believe it.”

“It’s difficult, I know.” Kirk cleared his throat. “So did he mention what he wanted to value? Jewelry? Sculptures?”

“No, I asked him, but he said he didn’t want to talk about it too much out in the open. I thought that was a little odd, but the lesson was over, and he hurried off.”

“Did he say he had somewhere to be?”

“No, but he did look at his watch, and then he walked away fast, you know, like he was running late.”

“Interesting. Thank you, Catherine, you’ve been very helpful. If you think of anything else that you think might have some bearing on the case, please contact me right away.” He handed her a business card. “Anytime.”

“Okay, I will.” She frowned. “I hope you figure out who did this.”

“Oh, I will.” He stood up and straightened his shirt. As Cathy stepped out of the study, he turned back to Mary. “Where is Hal?”

“I have no idea. I’m sure Trish filled you in on their argument?”

“No, she didn’t mention any argument.” He narrowed his eyes.

“Oh.”

“What about it, Mary?”

“Trish and Hal were having a bit of a spat.”

“About what?”

“Curtis, I assume.” Mary sighed. “Please understand, I’m sure Hal had nothing to do with Curtis’ death.”

“You can’t be sure, can you? You barely know him.”

“Maybe you’re right. Hal was jealous over Curtis and Trish flirting. Curtis gave them lessons when he first arrived. He’s friendly to all of his students. He was just a naturally friendly person. I think maybe Trish took it the wrong way. Or maybe Hal did. I don’t really know. All I know is that they were arguing about it yesterday, and this morning he took off, and hasn’t been back since.”

“How far did things go between Curtis and Trish?”

“I’m not sure if Hal knows how far.”

“But you do?” He rubbed a hand along his cheek and took a breath. “I know, you don’t want to get Trish into trouble. I’m not going to reveal more than I have to, but I need to know what was going on between Trish and Curtis.”

“I think I saw her kiss him.”

“You think you did?”

“It was at a distance, and I don’t see very well far away. But it did look like she kissed him. She kind of, surprised him, from what I could tell.”

“So he didn’t initiate it?”

“Not from what I saw.”

“After you saw this, did you see them together alone again?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“When she kissed him, did he talk to her for a while, or walk away?”

“I don’t know, I went inside. I didn’t want to be nosy.”

“Okay.” He made a note on his notepad. “I’m sure you understand that it is important I get in touch with Hal. If he’s done this, he could already be on the run. So if you hear anything about him, or see him, I need you to contact me right away. Can I trust you to do that?”

“Of course you can.”

“Great. I’m going to need you to be on my side with this. As I see it right now, we have quite a few suspects to look at, and the only ones with an alibi are Jim and Trish.”

“Are you saying you still consider my kids suspects?”

“I don’t know what kind of motive they could have for killing Curtis, but yes technically they are still suspects because they have no alibi for the time-span that Curtis could have been killed in.”

“But that time-span includes time when he was still alive.”

“I’m aware. Because, at any point during that time someone could have tampered with his equipment. Without more information I have no idea when the killer accessed Curtis’ tanks. It could have happened any time after they were dropped off and before he went diving, well for the final time.”

“I can assure you my children had nothing to do with this.”

“I believe you, Mary, I do. But I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t investigate all avenues. I may know you, but I do not know your children. Until I am able to cross them off the list, I would appreciate it if they remained in this area.”

“They’re here to visit for a few days.”

“Good. And, Hal and Trish?”

“They’re supposed to leave first thing tomorrow.”

“I’m going to have to prevent that. First, I need to track down

Hal. Thanks for your time, Mary, I do appreciate you speaking with me."

"You're welcome, Kirk." She watched him leave the study. Her legs weren't strong enough for her to stand up. Not because of pain, but because of Kirk's revelation that her children were murder suspects. How could she accept that? How could she explain that to them? Her stomach twisted with fear. What if Kirk got everything wrong? What if he found out about Ben's financial problems and somehow twisted that into a motive? Anxiety built within her the more she thought about the possibilities. As she stepped out of the study she saw Kirk head straight for Suzie.

"Can I speak to you for a minute?"

"Sure." Suzie stepped to the side with Kirk.

"I really need to find Hal, any idea where he is?"

"No, but I do have his license plate on file. Will that help?"

"Immensely."

"I'll get it for you."

"Could you run me a copy of Jim's information as well?"

"I don't have it yet. He was supposed to give it to me today."

"All right, I'll get it from him. And Rick?" He glanced around. "Where is he?"

"He took Cathy out on the porch."

"I'm going to want to talk to him, too."

"I understand. I think they're on the side porch, if you want to head out there I'll bring you Hal's information."

"Okay great, thank you." Kirk stepped out through the door just as Hal was stepping in.

"May I ask your name, sir?"

"Hal Richson. Is there a problem, Officer?"

"I need to speak with you about a very important matter."

"What's happened? Is Trish okay? Trish?"

"I'm fine, Hal." She stepped out of the living room.

"I'll tell you everything you need to know. Just come with me please." Kirk led Hal into the study.

"I should go in there with him, shouldn't I?" Trish looked at Suzie.

"I think he'll be all right by himself. It's probably best if you let Kirk speak with him alone."

"Maybe." Trish frowned and lingered near the door to the study. Suzie finished printing off what information she had, then stepped

outside to find Cathy and Rick. On her way out she overheard Mary and Ben as they spoke in the living room.

“Mom, I didn’t have anything to do with it, you know that right?”

“Of course I do. There’s nothing to worry about. I’m sure Kirk will get all of this figured out.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

Suzie walked around to the side porch, and paused when she heard raised voices.

“I didn’t come here to deal with the police. I don’t handle that well, you know that. I think we should leave.”

“I’m not going to leave my mom here to deal with all of this. There’s nothing to worry about. Just tell him where you were, and everything will be fine.”

“I shouldn’t have to. I don’t want to answer any questions. You can stay if you want to, I can understand that, but I’m leaving.”

“If you do that you’re going to make yourself look guilty.”

“It won’t matter if they can’t catch me, will it?”

“Rick, this isn’t like you. What’s going on? You can talk to me.”

“No, I can’t. I have to get out of here. I’m calling a cab.” He pulled out his phone. Suzie ducked back around the corner and sent Kirk a text.

Rick is about to run. You need to get out here before he does.

Suzie felt a pang of guilt for putting Cathy’s boyfriend in the crossfire, but with his behavior she had to wonder whether he might have something to hide.

“Rick please, just calm down. My mom knows the cops here, nothing bad is going to happen to you.”

“You don’t know that. Yes, I need a cab to Dune House right away.” He turned away as he spoke on the phone. Suzie didn’t even receive a text back, instead she heard the front door of Dune House swing open, and Kirk rounded the corner of the porch.

“Rick?” He paused in front of him. “Rick, we’re going to need to talk.”

“He doesn’t know anything.” Cathy stood up from her chair. “He had nothing to do with any of this.”

“All I need is to clear my list of people that had contact with Curtis. That’s it, Rick. Please, hang up the phone, I need to speak with you.”

Rick shoved his phone into his pocket. He turned to look at Kirk with a scowl. “I don’t have to speak to you. I know my rights.”

“Okay Rick. Is there a reason you’re feeling threatened? Have I done something to upset you?” Kirk asked.

Suzie stepped out to join them and placed a reassuring hand on Cathy’s shoulder.

“I have a problem.” Rick gritted his teeth. “I don’t deal well with authority.”

“Oh, I see.” Kirk nodded. “Well relax. I’m not here to force you into anything. I’d just like to know if you thought Curtis was into anything he shouldn’t have been? If you noticed anyone suspicious? Did you notice him arguing with anyone?”

“No, I barely spoke to him.”

“Is that so? Because, I just had someone tell me that they saw you in a heated exchange with Curtis earlier today.”

“What?” Cathy shook her head. “Rick didn’t even speak to Curtis today. Right Rick?”

“Is that right, Rick?” Kirk’s tone remained placid. “I just need all of the information I can get.”

“Yes, I spoke to him.”

“When?” Cathy stared at him.

“Cathy, let Kirk ask the questions.” Suzie patted her shoulder.

“But I don’t understand. You were still asleep when I left for the lesson with Curtis. When did you talk to him?” Cathy asked.

“Look, it isn’t what you think. I went down there to check on things. I wanted to make sure that Curtis was taking care of Cathy and Ben. They were doing exercises under the water, when I saw Curtis come back up. He left the water to make a phone call! He left Cathy and Ben in the water by themselves, with equipment they weren’t familiar with. I got upset, I told him that was against regulations and he needed to get back in the water. He argued with me, said he just needed to make a quick call, and they weren’t that deep. But anything can happen in a second. I told him to get back in the water or I’d break his phone.”

“So you threatened him?” Kirk narrowed his eyes.

“I was worried about Cathy and Ben.”

“Did he listen to you?”

“Yes, he went back in the water, but I think he sent a text first.”

“Do you remember that, Catherine? A time when Curtis left you alone in the water?” Kirk turned to look at her.

“Yes, I do. It was about fifteen minutes after we started out in the water. He motioned that he was going up, but Ben and I were fine and Curtis was back almost right away. Rick, why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“I haven’t had the chance.”

“What did you do after you sent Curtis back into the water?”

“I left.”

“So you were worried about Catherine’s safety, but not enough to stick around?” Kirk asked.

“I didn’t want her to know that I snapped at Curtis, all right? I was afraid she’d be upset with me.”

“Rick, it’s okay,” Cathy said.

“Rick, you’ve helped me out a lot here. Can you tell me what you did after you left the beach?”

“I checked out the town. Walked around for a while.”

“Did you meet anyone? Eat anywhere? Is there anyone who can verify where you were?”

“No, I was trying to blow off some steam, not make friends. I doubt anyone would remember seeing me, but maybe someone from one of the shops saw me from inside, I didn’t go into any shops though.”

“All right, listen. Stick around. Okay?” Kirk asked.

“Why? So you can arrest me? I know how these things work.”

“Not like that they don’t. I guarantee you I will only be putting handcuffs on the murderer. But if I need to be able to reach you to confirm something, or find out more information, and you’re not here, that’s going to cause me a lot of problems. Besides, this is supposed to be time with your girlfriend right? So why not stick around and keep her company.”

“I think that would be best, Rick. Please?” Cathy met his eyes.

“All right, yes, I’ll stay as long as we planned. But I can’t promise anything beyond that.”

“Great. Thanks Rick.” Kirk offered his hand. “I appreciate it.”

“Sure.” Rick shook his hand.

“I’ll cancel the taxi.” Cathy smiled.

Suzie and Kirk walked back around to the front porch. The crime scene van drove into the parking lot as they paused by the

front door.

"What about Hal, Kirk?"

"I've spoken with him. I've spoken with everyone here. Now, I'm going to let the crime scene team do their work."

"Okay." Suzie nodded.

"Please call me if you think of anything."

"Wait, Kirk."

"Yes?" He turned back to look at her.

"Do you think we're safe here?"

"Do you?" He stared back at her and squinted through the sunlight. "Is there something you're not telling me, Suzie?"

"No, nothing."

"All right then. You should be just fine. But if anything worries you, call me right away."

"I will." She watched him return to the patrol car. A shudder ran down her spine. Was she going to be sharing a roof with a killer? Mary stepped outside and joined her on the porch.

"Is Kirk leaving?"

"Yes. He said to call him if we think of anything. The crime scene team is going to go through Curtis' room."

"What do you think, Suzie? Who do you think did this?"

"Honestly, it might not have even been anyone that we know. It could have been someone in town, or one of his other students."

"That's possible."

"I think it's more likely to be Hal though. I bet he wanted to get revenge for the way that Curtis flirted with Trish." Suzie frowned.

"Or it could have been Trish. She might have been angry that he rejected her advances, if he did."

"Wow, I hadn't considered that."

"All I know is I wish my kids weren't mixed up in all of this." Mary shook her head. "I'm worried, Suzie. I know that you probably think I shouldn't be, but I am."

"I'm worried, too." Suzie took her hand. "I have no idea what's going to happen, but I do know that we need to make sure that Cathy and Ben aren't harmed by any of it."

"And Rick." Mary nodded.

"I'm not so sure about Rick." Suzie put her finger to her lips and peeked around the side of the house. The table where Rick and Cathy had been sitting was empty. She caught sight of them further down the beach. When she turned back to Mary, she frowned. "I

think he's hiding things, important things."

"Like what? He seemed nice enough to me."

"You didn't see what I just saw. When he realized he'd have to talk to Kirk, he kind of flipped out. Poor Cathy was trying to calm him down, but it was like a switch had been flipped inside of him. He said he has problems with authority. It seems to me that he's trying to present himself one way, but underneath, he's something completely different."

"I hope that's not the case. We'll have to keep a closer eye on him."

"Yes. In fact I think it would be best if we start our own investigation into the situation."

"You do?"

"Absolutely. We're talking about Ben and Cathy here. Kirk's a good officer, but we can't leave the fate of your kids in his hands. We need to figure out as soon as possible who did this, so that the three of you can refocus on enjoying your time together."

"I love that we think alike." Mary grinned. "But where are we going to start?"

"I'm not sure yet. Curtis' room and the dive shack are going to be off limits while the crime scene investigators go through them. So I think we should start with the few things that we do know about him."

"He loved going to the library." Mary shrugged. "He spent a lot of time there."

"Yes, he did. Which means that Louis probably has a good idea of what he was up to. We also know at least one person from his past, Jim, who we might be able to get more information from. Then there's Hal and Trish. If we can figure out whether Hal had access to Curtis' equipment we might have a better chance of determining whether he is the killer."

"What strikes me as odd about that, is if Hal was jealous, wouldn't he just confront Curtis? Maybe lose his temper? Whoever did this, had to put some serious thought into it, and plan to tamper with the equipment. Right?"

"That's true. I guess Hal might have tried to make it look like an accident. But it was clear to Kirk that it probably wasn't, because of Curtis' experience. So, if he did try to make it look like an accident he didn't do a very good job."

"No, that's for sure. I say, let's go down to the library and talk to

Louis. We can do some research on Hal, Trish, and Jim while we're there."

"Don't forget Rick." Suzie wagged her finger. "I don't trust him, not even a little bit."

"We can't leave Dune House unguarded though. I'd feel more comfortable if one of us stayed here."

"Yes, you're right. You stay, try to find out what the crime scene techs might have discovered in their search. Keep an eye on everyone. I'll head to the library. That will give you some time with the kids, even if things are tense. I saw Rick and Cathy head down to the beach."

"Okay, I guess I need to think about getting dinner ready, too. I don't think anyone ate lunch."

"Yes, they'll probably be very hungry."

"Text me as soon as you know anything."

"I will."

As Suzie drove away from Dune House she tried not to think about how worried Mary looked. As much as she loved Ben and Cathy, they weren't her kids. They were Mary's, which meant she had to be far more worried than Suzie. Suzie was worried enough to buy them both a plane ticket. However, she knew better than that. The best defense, was finding the real killer.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

Suzie pulled into the parking lot of the library and parked near the front. When she stepped inside there was a small line at the desk. Louis skimmed a stack of books through the scanner one by one. Suzie checked her watch and realized it was a little after three. That was prime time for the school kids to gather at the library. If she didn't get a chance to talk to Louis now, she might miss it altogether. She waited at the back of the line. Louis looked over the top of his glasses and smiled at her from behind the desk, then turned his focus back on the person he was helping. It wasn't long before Suzie was right in front of him.

"Suzie, is it true?" He stared at her, his smile gone.

"What?"

"Curtis, is he dead?"

"Word travels so fast around here. Yes, I'm afraid he is, Louis. I'm sorry. I know that you two had become close."

"I wouldn't exactly say that. I was about to start charging him rent for living here."

"He was here that often?"

"Every day for at least a few hours."

"What did he do?"

"Used the computers mostly. He never checked out a book. He would pull some off the shelf, then leave them on the table for me to re-shelve."

"Do you remember what he was looking at?"

"What's going on, I thought it was an accident?"

"Not according to Kirk."

"Interesting. Well, he was mostly looking at books about ancient artifacts, shipwrecks, tombs, that kind of thing."

"Did he mention why he was looking at those books?"

“I assumed he was trying to find treasure. He asked me once if I knew about an underwater cave that was rumored to be a few miles off the coast, near Bucky’s Inlet. I told him that there were lots of rumors about the area, but that was all they were, rumors. He even went so far as to ask me if there were any maps that showed the cave. I told him there was no cave that I knew about, and to please stop bothering me.”

“Oh, classic Louis.” She smiled.

“Okay, I was a little nicer than that. But he made a lot of extra work for me. Of course I am sad that he’s dead. He seemed like a good person, just nervous.”

“Nervous? I always thought he was pretty relaxed.”

“When he was here, he seemed pretty anxious. He’d check his phone a lot, look at the door, pace, then hunt down another book. It seemed to me that he couldn’t settle down.”

“That’s interesting. It’s like we knew two different people. Did you ever take a lesson with him?”

“Oh no, my feet are meant to be on the ground. When it comes to going underwater, I only go up to my chin,” Louis said.

“I understand that.” She offered a short laugh. “I think some people are just a little too adventurous.”

“And yet, here you are, sticking your nose into a murder.” He clucked his tongue.

“Is it that obvious?” Suzie raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, to me it is.”

“You always can see right through me. Anything you can do to help me out?”

“I’ll tell you what I can do, though it needs to stay between us,” Louis said.

“Of course it will.”

“I can give you access to his history. It’ll show all of his internet searches, and also whatever books he searched for. Like I said he never checked any out, so I don’t have any record of that, but he did look them up pretty frequently. That should give you some idea of what he might have been looking for.”

“Thanks Louis, that would be great.”

“Go take that first computer on the left, and I’ll open up the history for you.”

As Suzie settled in front of the computer she felt a little uneasy. Digging into Curtis’ business seemed to be intrusive, but at the same

time she was certain that he would want her to figure out who killed him. She took a deep breath and began to look through the search history. She found that he navigated to several websites that offered to sell antiques and other valuable items. She could tell that he'd looked through some of the listings, however she didn't see any posts made by him.

When Suzie began to sort through some of the library catalog searches he'd made, she discovered that he'd been looking up books about valuing antiques, restoration, and the legalities involved in finding foreign treasure. It occurred to her that he might have been planning for another treasure hunt. As interesting as the information was, it didn't really give her a direction to go in. She returned to his internet history and found that he'd looked up the name Jim Smithsy. So Curtis had been looking for his friend Jim before he showed up? She thought that was a little strange.

Then Suzie noticed that Curtis had visited a website that allowed people to search coordinates over water. After some skimming she realized she wasn't going to be able to find the exact coordinates he'd searched. She reached for a slip of paper beside the computer to jot down the website. As she began to write she noticed that the paper had some indentations, as if someone had written on another slip of paper on top of it. She brushed the tiny pencil across the ridges and dips in the paper and soon revealed a set of coordinates. Her heart skipped a beat as she guessed that Curtis had grabbed two slips of paper and realized it after he wrote down the coordinates, then put one back. She typed the coordinates into the website's search engine, and found herself staring at wide open ocean. It told her absolutely nothing.

Maybe Suzie couldn't figure out from the website exactly what the coordinates meant, but she was sure that Paul would be able to help her. He was supposed to dock that evening, and she couldn't wait for him to get there. She was sure he would be able to help her at least figure out what Curtis might have been looking for out on the water. She tucked the paper into her purse. Then she shifted gears. She needed to know more about the people who were under her roof.

As she began to dig through Hal and Trish's background it didn't take her long to find out that Hal had a checkered past. He had a history of assault, and had been arrested at least twice before. Trish on the other hand appeared to be a saint. She worked with many

charities, and had a beautiful singing voice, according to a few videos she found on the internet. With Hal's history, it was pretty easy to assume that he could be responsible for Curtis' death. However, the stumbling block was, whether he had the knowledge to contaminate Curtis' equipment.

Suzie began to search for information about Curtis' friend, Jim. He was much harder to pin down. However, using the information from the adventure school where they both took classes she was able to track down some of his social media posts. The most important was a photograph with Curtis, as they celebrated the find of a shipwreck. The post was from a few months ago, and didn't say much about the find itself, but it did claim that both Curtis and Jim found the shipwreck together. She took a snap of it on her phone, and dug a little deeper.

No red flags were raised when she looked at Jim's profile. She couldn't find any family members listed and unlike Curtis he didn't seem to have very many friends, but besides that everything looked pretty normal. Frustrated with the dead ends, she decided to take a break and zero in on Rick. Searching for information on Rick made her feel uneasy. She knew she was invading both Rick's privacy, and Cathy's. It was easy to find information about Rick by navigating through Cathy's social media. She did discover that his parents were deceased. His stint in the navy hadn't lasted long, and though there was no mention of dishonorable discharge, there did seem to be some controversy about why he parted ways with the navy. She also found several pictures of him in diving gear, at different exotic locations. The pictures were dated at least a year before he began dating Cathy. It seemed to her that he was quite an accomplished diver. He would certainly have the knowledge to contaminate Curtis' equipment. But why would he? After reaching another dead end on information about his past, she decided that she was done with her search. The library was packed with kids and parents.

Suzie waved to Louis on her way out the door, but he was occupied with a very long line. On the drive back to Dune House she considered whether Curtis might have been trying to find something in particular. She recalled Louis mentioning the rumor of a nearby underwater cave. Maybe Curtis suspected there was treasure there. She decided to try to find out if the cave actually existed. She parked in front of Dune House and sat in the car for a

moment. On the porch she could see the furniture she stained. Just that morning, getting that project done, was the most important thing to her. Now that it was done, she couldn't care less about it. All she wanted to know was what happened to Curtis.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

Mary glanced at the clock. There was still an hour before she could get started on dinner. She found it difficult to keep herself occupied. Her mind kept turning back to Curtis, and her kids being on the suspect list.

“Mom, have you seen my shoes?” Ben frowned as he walked into the kitchen. “I left them by my bed, and now I can’t seem to find them anywhere.”

“I haven’t seen them. Are you sure you didn’t wear them down to the beach at some point?”

“No, I didn’t. Maybe Rick took them.”

“Why would Rick steal your shoes?”

“I don’t think he would steal them, but maybe he wasn’t paying attention and took them by mistake. We have the same size foot.”

“Hey Ben, how well do you know Rick?”

“Pretty well, I guess. He’s always pushing Cathy to invite me when they go out somewhere.”

“Really? Why do you think that is?”

“He said, he didn’t want me to feel left out. I think it drives Cathy crazy. I turn down some invites because I know she wants time with him.”

“It seems a little odd that he’s so clingy so fast, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know. He said family is important to him. I think he’s been through a lot of hard times to be honest.”

“Has he told you about any of them?”

“No, but he implies that he’s been alone most of his life. I can’t imagine what might have happened to his parents. I don’t like to be too nosy.”

“I understand that.” Mary shook her head. “I don’t like to be either. But he is dating your sister.”

“I’ll keep an eye on him, don’t worry.”

“Here they come now.” Mary tilted her head towards the kitchen window that overlooked the beach. “You can ask Rick about your shoes.”

“Thanks Mom.” He went out through the front door to meet them. Mary heard some footsteps on the stairs and turned to see Jim.

“Hi Jim, how are you holding up?”

“I’m still trying to make sense out of all of it, to be honest. Curtis was such a good guy, I can’t imagine anyone wanting to hurt him.”

“Me neither. But when you two worked together, was there anyone that he had problems with?”

“Never. Curtis was always looking out for people. He even gave free lessons to kids that couldn’t afford it. He used his day off to do it. We worked together at an adventure business. It offered abseiling, diving, and a few other sports. He focused mostly on the diving, and I took care of the abseiling. He even convinced me to offer some free lessons. Trust me, I wasn’t the generous type at the time. But seeing those kids so happy, it changed me. If it wasn’t for Curtis, I never would have experienced that.”

“Good friends can do that for you.” Mary smiled. “I know, Suzie and I have been friends for decades. I wouldn’t be here in this beautiful place if it weren’t for her.”

“I’m so glad you two have each other.” He sighed.

“I’m sorry, Jim. Losing Curtis must be very hard on you. Do you have any family that you might reach out to?”

“No, no family. Curtis didn’t have any either. That’s something we had in common. We both came up in the foster system, though we didn’t know each other then. It was something only he and I could talk about, you know?”

“I imagine so.” Her heart ached for Jim. He’d been through so much in his young life already, and now he’d lost a good friend. “If there’s anything I can do to help, anything at all, just name it. All right?”

“I think I’m just going to go into town to pick up a few things. I hadn’t planned to stay, but it doesn’t feel right for me to leave until all of this is settled.”

“It’s probably best that you don’t. Kirk may need more information from you.”

“Yes, I know.” He shook his head. “I wish I knew something that

would help. I'll be back in a little while."

"Dinner's at five."

"I'll be here."

As he headed for the door, Suzie opened it. She nodded to Jim as he stepped past her, then headed straight for Mary.

"How are the kids holding up?"

"Okay, I think. Cathy is attached to Rick's hip, and someone has stolen Ben's shoes."

"Well, I found out a little information at the library." Suzie filled her in on what Curtis' search habits were at the library. She showed Mary the coordinates and explained how she had got them. "I think he was on to something. Maybe he was trying to find that cave. Maybe he was trying to find treasure. Whatever it was, I think he was willing to risk his life to get it, and in the end it did cost him his life."

"So you think someone murdered him because he found treasure?"

"Maybe?" Suzie shrugged. "Or maybe not. I'm not sure. But Paul's meant to dock today so I am going to talk to him tonight about finding that cave. It has to have something to do with all of this."

"But Louis said it was just a rumor, right?"

"Yes, he did, but Louis doesn't know everything"

"Really?"

"He knows almost everything, not everything."

"Don't tell him that." Mary winked. "Let me know what Paul says. I can handle dinner here. You deserve a night away from all of this. Take him to dinner."

"I think I will do that. I don't want to throw him right into the middle of all of this without having a chance to talk to him first. But are you sure you want to do dinner by yourself? With Trish and Hal?"

"I'm not worried about it. Besides, Cathy and Ben will be here with me. I will be just fine. Stop worrying about me, and find out about that cave."

"Thanks Mary." She headed up the stairs with a particular blouse in mind that she wanted to wear to greet Paul. As she passed Ben and Rick's room, she noticed that the door was open. Her investigative past insisted that she take a look through his things. The desire for Cathy to trust her fought against the urge. She

lingered in the doorway for a few more seconds, then took a step inside. She had to check the linens, and things. That was her excuse. She noticed Rick's bag. It was open on the foot of his bed. As she walked towards it, her heart seemed to grow too big to be contained by her chest. She reached for the bag.

"Aunt Suzie?"

She froze, then glanced over her shoulder at Ben. "Hi."

"Hi. What are you doing?"

"Oh, your mother told me that your shoes were missing. I thought I'd take a look around for you."

"Don't worry, I'm sure that they will turn up. I just need flipflops for hanging out on the beach anyway, right?"

"Sure, okay. If I see them, I'll let you know."

"Great, thanks." He smiled.

Suzie excused herself from the room and hurried into her own. As soon as the door was closed she let out a breath of relief. She was lucky it was Ben and not Rick who caught her snooping. After a few moments to calm down, she changed, and headed back down the stairs. The kitchen smelled lovely with whatever Mary was cooking, but there was no one in sight to enjoy it. She caught a glimpse of Cathy, Ben, and Rick on the deck, then spotted Mary near the side door. To her surprise, Mary swung it open, and stepped in.

"Oh wow, did the locksmith come out?"

"Oh yes, I'm sorry, I'm so scatter-brained today. He came out while you were at the library. It's all fixed now."

"Great. That's one good thing I guess."

"We need as many as we can get. Go enjoy your evening with Paul, that's a very good thing."

"Yes, I hope it will be."

Suzie headed towards the dock. When she parked she noticed that Paul's boat was already in the slip. She headed down the wooden planks to meet him. As she approached the boat he emerged from the cabin and smiled at her.

"You are a beautiful sight."

"Thanks." She returned the smile. "So are you."

"Coming on board?" He offered her his hand.

"Yes please." She climbed onto the boat with his hand to steady her. Once on board she hugged him, then shared a lingering kiss.

"Every time I leave, I wonder if I've lost my mind to leave you

behind.” He gazed into her eyes.

“But isn’t it so sweet when we reunite?”

“Yes, it is.” He kissed her forehead. “So, what kind of wild adventures did you have while I was gone?”

“Unfortunately, no adventures, only tragedy.”

“Tragedy?” He led her into the cabin and pulled out a bottle of wine. “What happened?”

“Curtis was murdered.”

“Curtis?” He nearly dropped one of the wine glasses. “How? By who?”

“Someone tampered with his equipment, Kirk doesn’t know who yet.”

“That’s awful. Does he have any suspects?”

“Just everyone at Dune House.” Suzie frowned. “Including Mary’s children.”

“What? That’s ridiculous.”

“Yes, it is, but it doesn’t change the fact that they are suspects. Mary and I have been trying to get to the bottom of things, but we don’t have much to go on.”

“This must be rough on both of you.” He poured the wine and handed her the glass. “How is Mary holding up?”

“I think she’s okay, but she’s a nervous wreck. On top of her kids being on the suspect list, Cathy’s boyfriend who she brought along is also. Honestly, I don’t trust the guy.”

“Would you trust anyone that dated Cathy?” He took a sip of his wine.

“Probably not. But this guy has some real issues. He has temper problems, and he’s an experienced diver. Something went wrong while he was in the navy. Everything about him just feels off.”

“Hm. Your instincts are usually pretty good. Do you think he did this?”

“I’m not sure. The obvious suspect is Hal, remember you met him before you launched?”

“Yes. He seemed like a decent guy.”

“He did, I know. But there were some issues between him and Curtis. It’s so tough to put my finger on who might have done this. At least I know it wasn’t Ben or Cathy.”

“That’s a relief. Does Kirk know that?”

“I’m not sure. They don’t have alibis, so he won’t remove them from the suspect list. But he’s been polite about it.”

“Mary must be beside herself.” Paul finished his wine. “I’m sorry you were dealing with this all alone, but I’m here now.”

“And I’m so glad.” She wrapped her arms around him and closed her eyes. After a few moments of savoring his warmth, she recalled the question she wanted to ask him. “Do you know anything about a secret underwater cave around here, near Bucky’s Inlet?”

“Oh, you’ve heard about the cave?” He laughed.

“So there is one?”

“No.” He shook his head. “That’s an old story that some of the teens of my generation made up. It was to keep people away from their island.”

“Island? No secret underwater cave, but there is a secret island?”

“It’s not really secret, just tiny and unpopular. At least it was. The idea of the cave and its supposed location was to divert attention from the island. Teenagers like to use it for fun and not be interrupted by adults.”

“Ah, I see. So you’re sure there’s no cave?”

“I’m certain. Why?”

“I think Curtis was searching for it before he died. I thought maybe if he found it, it might have something to do with his death.”

“No, there’s no cave. I’m not sure why he would be looking for it.”

“One more dead end.” She frowned.

“Hey, try not to worry.” He looked into her eyes. “This will all get settled soon enough. It’s going to be hard going through it, but Curtis’ death will be solved.”

“How can you be so confident? Jason isn’t here, and there is no real evidence.”

“Kirk is very capable and Jason trained Kirk, and as far as evidence, give it time. Things have a strange way of coming to the surface if you’re patient.”

“I’m just worried about Mary.”

“And you?” He brushed his thumb along her cheek. “You’re always thinking of others, but I’m sure this has been a struggle for you, too.”

“Yes, it has been.” She glanced away from him. “I keep thinking, maybe if I’d noticed something, maybe Curtis would still be alive.”

“But you know that isn’t true. There was nothing that you could have done.”

“Maybe not, but it’s eerie to think that the murderer might be

under my own roof." She sighed, then filled him in on the suspects. "I was certain that it had to be Hal, he has the criminal background, he had motive, and I've seen a bit of his temper. But no matter how I spin it, I can't find enough motive. Sure, he was jealous over Trish, but jealous enough to kill? It took forethought to kill Curtis, not just a boiled over temper."

"Not to worry, that's Kirk's job."

"No, it's mine, and Mary's, because as long as the kids are caught up in this, they are in danger. Honestly, I'm starting to suspect that this has to do with treasure. Do you think it could? Doesn't that sound crazy?"

"Yes, it absolutely could, and no it doesn't sound crazy. Treasure hunters take their adventures very seriously, and they are highly secretive about what they find, and where they find it."

"So if Curtis found something of value, and he was trying to hide it from others, maybe someone came after him for it?"

"It's very possible. Everyone thinks of treasure hunting as just some pipe dream, but if you find a good sunken ship, or some ancient coins, it can make you rich."

"Wow, I didn't realize that was even still a thing."

"It is, and those who are dedicated to finding it, are very passionate about what they do."

"Maybe that's why he asked Cathy about finding more information about some artifacts. Maybe he found something!"

"Even if he did, unless you have an idea of where it might be it won't make any difference."

His words reminded her of the slip of paper in her pocket. She fished it out and held it out to him.

"Do you have any idea what this might mean? It's the only scrap of evidence that I've found so far."

"Let me take a look." Paul studied it for a moment, then nodded. "It's coordinates."

"I know that, but when I looked them up, it just showed open ocean."

"Well, that makes sense. If he was a treasure hunter, then it's probably a dive site."

"Yes, that does make sense. So he used these coordinates to find the site?"

"Yes. It's difficult to pinpoint the exact location of a shipwreck, but if you can get close, then you can usually find it."

“I found a picture of Jim and Curtis celebrating the find of a shipwreck. I wonder if it might be the same one.”

“If it is, then Jim should know all about it.”

“But he hasn’t mentioned it. At least, I don’t think he has. He said something to Curtis at dinner about dangerous dives and I did see a photo on the internet of them celebrating the find of a shipwreck together.”

“Let me check something.” He entered the coordinates into a device, then nodded. “Yes, this would be a very dangerous area to dive in. The currents are strong, and pretty frequent sightings of sharks. Only experts would risk diving in this area, and even they would be hesitant.”

“So Curtis took a huge risk if he went diving here, with Jim, and found the shipwreck.”

“Yes.”

“Then he must have had some strong motivation.”

“I’d say so.” Paul shook his head. “I don’t know exactly what he was up to, but I’d say that there might be a lot more to this murder than you realize.”

“Jim might be the only one who knows the truth. Maybe he knew enough that he wanted to kill Curtis.”

“Maybe. But you said they’re good friends, didn’t you?”

“They are, but friendship doesn’t always last. Curtis was doing searches on Jim before he died. Maybe they lost contact, and Curtis was trying to reach him for some reason. But, Curtis was surprised, or at least seemed that way, when Jim showed up at Dune House. He wasn’t expecting him.”

“Interesting. So, if Curtis wasn’t looking for Jim to contact him, maybe he was looking for him to figure out where he was.”

“Maybe. Also how did Jim leave Dune House without me or Mary noticing, the lock on the side door was jammed so we couldn’t open it and I was on the porch and Mary was out back. We would have seen him.”

“You might have missed him,” Paul said.

“Maybe, but I don’t see how.” Suzie ran her hand across her forehead. “All of this is exhausting.”

“Then let’s take a break from it. Just for tonight, let’s focus on you and me. We can take a fresh look at things in the morning, okay?”

“Yes. That sounds perfect.” She kissed his cheek and closed her

eyes. As much as she wanted all of her focus to be on him, she knew it wouldn't be, not until she was certain that Ben and Cathy were safe, and Curtis' killer had been found.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

Mary finished the dishes from dinner and began to dry them. She could hear Ben, Cathy, and Rick outside on the deck. She tried not to listen in to their conversation, but snippets of it drew her attention.

“I can’t believe any of this is happening.”

“Don’t worry about it too much, Ben. I’m sure that the police will find his killer.” Cathy’s voice drifted through the kitchen window.

“Unless they’re the type that just likes to wrap up a case without actually finding the killer. You know, a cop that picks someone who looks guilty enough to pass, and just throws the cuffs on.” Rick’s voice had a nervous tremble in it.

“Rick, stop. You’re going to scare Ben,” Cathy said.

“I’m not a child, you know. I’m aware of how the world works. But I don’t think Kirk is like that. Mom and Suzie are friends with him. I’m sure that he’s a stand-up guy,” Ben said.

“I bet you’re right. Mom is usually a good judge of character. if she trusts Kirk then I think we can trust him, too.”

Mary’s heart sank. She wanted her children to be able to trust her judgment. But could they? Could she trust Kirk? An image of both of them being led away in handcuffs flashed through her mind. It was almost impossible not to be overwhelmed by the thought of it. Tears stung her eyes as panic grew within her. Hopefully Suzie would find out something about the underwater cave. She finished the dishes, then walked into the living room. A sound from the couch startled her.

“Trish, I didn’t even know you were there.”

“I’m sorry.” She sniffled. “I needed some space from Hal.”

“Are you okay?” Mary sat down on the couch beside her. “Do

you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know what to say. I feel like I caused this whole problem. If it wasn't for me being silly with Curtis, the police wouldn't even be looking at Hal as a suspect."

"The police are looking at all of us as suspects. They have to, until they find the killer. None of this is your fault."

"I keep trying to tell myself that, but I'm not sure if I believe it."

"This is a hard time for all of us. But I can assure you that Kirk will do a fantastic job of investigating the case."

"Thank you. That does make me feel a little better." Trish smiled slightly. "Hal's gone down to the beach with the key to our room, do you have a second key for me?"

"Sure, I'll get it for you." Mary walked back over to the desk and noticed that Jim's paperwork was still not filled out. She retrieved a key for Trish and gave it to her. As she turned back, Jim walked through the hall.

"Jim!"

"Yes?" He stopped and looked at her.

"I missed you at dinner."

"Sorry, I'm having a hard time being social right now."

"I understand. Did you have something to eat?"

"Yes, I grabbed something in town."

"Listen, I hate to bother you, but I really do need to fill in your information for our records."

"I understand. What do you need?"

"Just an address and driver's license number."

"This should do then." He reached into his wallet and pulled out his driver's license. As he handed it over to Mary, a piece of paper fell to the floor that must have been tucked behind it. She reached for it to hand it back to him, but he was already up the stairs. When she picked up the piece of paper and started to fold it back up, her eyes widened. It was the same set of numbers that Suzie found at the library. The paper seemed too worn to be new. She reached for her phone to call Suzie, but the front door swung open before she could.

"Hi Mary."

"Home so early?"

"Paul was tired, and I didn't want you to be alone here too long."

"Look what I found." Mary held out the slip of paper. "It fell out

of Jim's wallet."

"Oh wow, that's the same coordinates. It looks like both Jim and Curtis were at that location at some point, most likely together."

"I'm going to make a copy of his driver's license." Mary carried it behind the desk. "He's upstairs in his room."

"I'm going to go talk to him. I'll take his license back to him," Suzie said.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"I want to get a better grasp on him, and who he is. He's our only real connection to Curtis."

"All right, do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I don't want him to feel ambushed. I'll let you know what I find out."

"Okay. Here." Mary handed her the driver's license. "I'm done with this."

"Thanks." Suzie grabbed the license and headed up the stairs. After having some time with Paul she felt more centered. No matter what, the murder had to be solved. When she reached the third floor she knocked on the door.

"Can I help you?" Jim asked as he opened the door.

"Your driver's license." Suzie smiled as she offered it to him.

"Thanks." He took it and started to close the door. She wedged her foot in before he could close it.

"Could I talk to you for a moment, please?"

"I guess." He swung the door back open. She glanced past him at the room. Everything was just as she'd left it.

"You mentioned something at dinner, about a dangerous dive that you and Curtis went on. I was just curious, and this might sound very silly, but did you and Curtis ever go on other dives more recently and find some kind of treasure?"

"Excuse me?" He narrowed his eyes. "Why are you asking me this?"

"Honestly, I'm just curious. I didn't think there were any real treasure hunters left in the world. I guess it's a part of Curtis that I didn't have the chance to know."

"Yes, Curtis was a hunter, so was I. We were partners for a long time."

"Did you ever find anything recently?"

"Uh, just some old shipwreck."

"Well, that must have been exciting."

“Not really. It was already picked bare when we found it. Nothing much to it.”

“Still, finding it must have been…”

“Finding an old shipwreck that someone else has already found is not exciting. It’s disappointing. Curtis and I invested all of our money in that dive, and we lost it all.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Me too. Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to turn in.”

“All right. Do you need any fresh linens?”

“No, thanks I’m fine.”

“What about a clean? I can do a quick tidy.”

“No, thank you. I prefer my privacy.”

“Okay, I understand. If there’s anything you need, just let me know.”

“Thanks, I will.” He closed the door and she heard the lock engage. For a moment she lingered in the hallway. She really wanted to have a look around his room, but while he was in it, she knew that wouldn’t be possible. At least he had confirmed that he’d found a shipwreck with Curtis. But if they’d both lost everything on the dive, and there was no treasure to recover, what motive would Jim have to kill him?

When Suzie met Mary downstairs again, she shared with her the information she’d found, and also what Paul told her about the cave and the island.

“So why was Curtis looking for the cave?”

“I would guess to hide something there. Or maybe he thought something was already hidden there.”

“The treasure from the shipwreck?” Mary raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t know. Jim said there wasn’t anything at the shipwreck. Why would he lie about it?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe Curtis found something on a different dive.”

“Maybe.” Suzie sighed. “I’m going to bed. I’m exhausted.”

“Me too. Hal and Trish are in their rooms, I saw Ben go up a little while ago. I have no idea where Cathy and Rick are, but I’m sure they’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll see you in the morning, Mary.”

“Yes. Try to get some sleep, Suzie.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12

Mary didn't close her eyes until she heard the front door open and Cathy's voice. Once she knew she was home, she was able to close her eyes and begin to fall asleep. It had been the same way since they were born. She needed to know that her kids were safe in bed before she could go to sleep herself. Once she was asleep, her dreams tormented her. Curtis on the beach, Curtis at the breakfast table, Curtis with his wide smile and eagerness to help with whatever task she couldn't manage. When she woke the next morning she could barely comprehend the idea that he was dead. It took her a few minutes before all of the events filtered back through her mind. With a heavy heart she made her way into the kitchen to start the coffee. She'd barely gotten a pot brewed when there was a knock on the front door. It was just after seven, quite early for anyone to pay a visit. Before she could get the door, Suzie opened it. Only then did Mary realize that Suzie was already up.

"I guess she didn't sleep well either," Mary said to herself and frowned. She headed back to her room to change into something other than pajamas. From the front door she heard Suzie's voice.

"Kirk, good morning. Did you find something?"

"No unfortunately, not yet. That's why I'm here. I wanted to start my morning off with the only lead I have. That's right here, at Dune House."

"Well, you're welcome to come in, I'm not sure what else we have to share with you, but of course we are happy to help. There's some fresh coffee."

"Great, I could use some."

Suzie smiled as she led him to the kitchen. She guessed he might have come to Dune House just to get a cup of coffee. She set out three mugs, then poured one for Kirk. "Anything in it?"

“Information?” He smiled.

“I’ve told you everything I know, Kirk.”

“Well, I need to know more. Maybe there’s something that you didn’t notice. Something that you saw, but you didn’t understand was important.”

“I’m a pretty observant person.”

“All the more reason to pick your brain.”

“Lovely.” She quirked a brow and poured her own mug of coffee, then poured one for Mary as well.

“Cathy, Ben, and Rick are here from out of town. We can’t ignore that they might have some kind of involvement in this crime.”

“There’s no way that Cathy or Ben had anything to do with it.”

“Rick?”

“Honestly, I don’t know much about him, but I doubt it. Cathy is a good judge of character, like her mother.”

“What about Ben?”

“What about him?”

“He seemed very nervous when I spoke with him.”

“He’s barely an adult.”

Kirk set his mug back down on the counter and turned to face her.

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re not telling me everything, Suzie?”

“I don’t know.” She picked up the mug and turned on the tap to wash it.

“The only way for me to do my job is if I can rely on my witnesses to be honest with me.”

“I am not a witness.” She turned off the water and set the glass in the drainer. “I didn’t see Curtis die.”

“No, you didn’t. But you saw him day in and day out. You saw most of my suspect pool, far more than I did. You’re a great source of information to me. I just don’t understand why you wouldn’t want to help me. Unless you’re protecting someone?”

“Kirk, you’re imagining things.”

“Am I?” He frowned. “I have a feeling if Jason was here you’d be much more cooperative.” He tried to meet her eyes. “Maybe you haven’t known me long enough to trust me, but my only goal is to find the murderer. If you have information that can help with that, you should tell me.”

“If I had information that would help with that, I would tell you. Maybe you haven’t known me long enough to know that you can trust me, Kirk. I would never hinder an investigation.”

“But you are.” He crossed his arms. “I can tell that you’re hiding something from me. Anytime I bring up Ben, you avoid the subject. You skirt around any personal information about him as if you’ve never even met him before. I know that you’re very close to him, have been part of his life since he was a child. So I’m not buying the amnesia.”

“It’s not amnesia.”

“Then tell me the truth.” He shook his head. “Whatever you are trying to hide, I’m going to find out about it. It may take me a few more days, but I’m going to get to the truth. It would be better if it came from you, wouldn’t it? So that you can explain whatever it is that you’re hiding?”

Suzie closed her eyes. She didn’t want to do anything to put Ben in danger, but she did know that with a little digging he would be able to find out about Ben’s financial troubles.

“He had nothing to do with this, Kirk.”

“Then let me prove that. Let me clear his name. I can’t do that unless I have accurate information.”

“You’re going to have to talk to Mary.”

“Does Mary know everything that you do?”

“Do I?” Mary stepped into the kitchen and looked between the two. “What are we talking about here?”

“Ben.” Suzie frowned. “I’m sorry, Mary.”

“Don’t be. It’s okay. He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“Then why are you two dodging my questions about him?” He rested his hands on his hips.

“It’s not what you think.” Mary sighed. “My son has gotten himself into some trouble, and he asked me not to bring the police into it. It has nothing to do with any of this.”

“I need to be the judge of that. So please, share it with me.”

“She doesn’t have to…”

“No, Suzie it’s fine. Kirk’s right, we should be cooperating in every way we can. We all have the same goal. Ben took a loan from a loan shark, and the guy has been harassing him. That’s all.”

“He got tangled up with a loan shark? That’s not a good idea.”

“No, it isn’t, but it’s a mess he got himself into, and we are going to handle it.”

“How are you going to do that?” Kirk shifted from one foot to the other. “These people are not the type that you want to play around with. They can be very vengeful, and violent.”

“I’m aware, Kirk.”

“So? Let me look into this guy for you.”

“My son would rather we didn’t go to the police about this. I thought maybe Jason…”

“Look, I know Jason is like family to you as well. I get that. But I am here to help you also. As far as this investigation goes, I need to know that you are going to be forthcoming from now on. I take a murder on my beach very seriously, and I’m not going to wait until Jason gets back to solve it. All right?”

“All right.” Suzie nodded as she stared at him. Kirk had more backbone than she expected, and she admired him for it. “Anything we come across, we’ll do our best to keep you informed.”

“Good.” He shifted his gaze between them, then nodded. “When you’re ready to talk about what we can do to help your son, you let me know.”

“I will.” Mary cleared her throat. “Thank you, Kirk. I really appreciate the offer.”

“And I appreciate your honesty.” As he turned to leave, Suzie was tempted to remind him that Ben had nothing to do with the murder, however Mary beat her to it.

“No matter what happens, Kirk, keep in mind, Ben is not a suspect here.”

Kirk paused at the door and looked back over his shoulder at her. “He’s not a suspect in your eyes. But in my eyes, until I’ve found the killer, every single person who had contact with Curtis in the hours before his death, is a suspect.” He stepped out without another word and closed the door behind him. Mary reached for Suzie’s hand and sighed.

“Don’t worry, Mary. Ben will be fine.”

“I hope so. But my instincts are telling me something different. We need to figure out why Curtis was killed, and fast. That might give us some idea about who did it.”

“Then I need to go to the one place he looked into when he was here.”

“What do you mean?”

“The coordinates that Jim and Curtis both have, maybe they went diving there, maybe that was where the shipwreck was. It is a

couple of hours away, but I can hire some divers to check things out. If I leave after breakfast today I can be back in time for lunch."

"All right, but I'm going with you."

"But Mary you aren't exactly fond of boats."

"I'll be fine, I'm not letting you go without me. What do you think we're going to find?"

"I'm not sure, but it's an opportunity to retrace Curtis' steps. I'll meet you down at the docks after breakfast."

"Are you going to have Paul take us out?"

"No, he needs his rest, he has to go on a few more short trips this week, he's showing a new fisherman to the area the ropes. The divers should have a boat."

"Okay, I'll meet you there."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

About an hour later Suzie and Mary were on the deck of an unfamiliar boat, headed far out into the wide-open ocean.

“Suzie, maybe we should have waited until Paul was free and brought him along.” Mary clung to the railing and tried not to think about how far away from land they were.

“I didn’t want to bother him and we might not find anything at all, then we would have wasted Paul’s time.”

“I think you’re just afraid to admit that you wanted to go on a treasure hunt.”

“What’s so wrong with that?” Suzie’s eyes widened. “If we were to find any real treasure, it would be pretty amazing, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would, but it’s unlikely. I’m betting that all Curtis left out here was some empty boxes. Even if he had hidden treasure somewhere, whoever killed him most likely has it. If he was killed for it, then they wouldn’t have let things get too far without finding out where the treasure was.”

“Maybe that’s true. But I’m willing to look anyway. It’s the only lead that we have right now.”

“You mean, other than Hal?” Mary tapped her fingernails against the railing of the ship. “I think that we can both agree Hal is still the main suspect here.”

“I do agree. But until we find out more about what Curtis was trying to find, we’re not going to have any solid evidence either way. If we retrace his steps we might just be able to get this case solved in time for you to get some quality time with your kids.”

“I still don’t know what I’m going to do about Ben.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe he got himself into this mess. I swear, I taught him better than this.”

“I’m sure you did, but you can remember what it was like to be

his age. It's so easy to think that you have everything figured out, it takes years before you realize that you don't actually have a clue."

"I know, I know, but this is a big mistake. It could affect him for the rest of his life."

"We're not going to let it get that far." Suzie patted her shoulder. "We're going to make sure that this guy gets stopped in his tracks."

When the boat slowed, Suzie's heart sped up. This was it. This was the moment when they would find out if the shipwreck was actually there, and potentially the treasure right along with it. The captain stayed onboard as the two divers they hired launched off into the water.

"Do you think they'll find anything?" Mary clutched Suzie's hand.

"I don't know, I hope so." Suzie frowned. "We need some kind of direction in this case."

After some time, the divers surfaced and climbed back onto the boat.

"There is definitely a shipwreck down there, a huge one." The first diver began to remove his equipment.

"We took a swim through but there was no sign of any valuables." The second diver sat down beside him. "We can't look any further. The structure of the ship isn't sound, and the currents are too strong, I'm sorry."

"That's all right." Suzie smiled. "At least we know we're getting somewhere now."

"The question is where? Just because Jim and Curtis found a shipwreck, that doesn't mean that Curtis was murdered over it. If there was nothing there to find, then why would Curtis be killed?"

"Maybe there was something there. Maybe Jim killed Curtis for it. Or maybe Curtis took it, or maybe someone thinks that Curtis did."

"Like Jim?"

"Jim was there with him, so it would seem strange if he thought Curtis found something. But maybe someone in their circle, like Rick."

"How would Rick be in their circle?"

"He's a diver. Maybe they crossed paths at some point."

"Maybe." Mary frowned.

When they made it back to Dune House, Kirk was there to greet

them.

"You ladies have been hard to track down today."

"Did you need us for something?" Mary sat down in one of the rocking chairs on the front porch.

"I did. We finished the search of the dive shack. I was wondering if either of you recognize these shoes." He held up a plastic evidence bag with a bright pair of green and gold sneakers inside.

"No." Suzie shook her head. "All I ever saw Curtis in was flipflops."

"Yes, or very rarely sandals. I don't think he owned a pair of socks." Mary shook her head.

"Then these shoes may belong to the killer, they aren't Curtis' shoe size. Whoever it is, is probably missing them. Please let me know if anyone mentions anything about them." As he turned and walked away Mary's heart flipped. She recalled Ben looking for his shoes. She hadn't noticed what his shoes looked like when he arrived. She couldn't be sure that the shoes Kirk had were Ben's. But it was strange that Ben was missing shoes, when shoes had been found in the dive shack. She bit into her bottom lip as she wondered if Suzie would remember that Ben's shoes were missing. If she did, she didn't mention it.

"I'm going to visit Paul for a little bit. Maybe he can give me some direction on where to go next."

"All right, I'll take care of lunch and check in with the guests." As soon as Suzie left, Mary grabbed her cell phone and sent a text to Ben.

Did you find your shoes yet?

Her hand trembled as she waited for the response. After a few minutes, she received one.

Not yet. Rick said he didn't take them. I don't know who did, but they are gone. It's really strange.

She stared at the text on her phone. The last thing she wanted to do was accuse her son of anything criminal, but how did his sneakers end up in the dive shack? He would have worn flipflops to go to the lesson. Maybe they weren't his shoes at all. Maybe she was jumping to conclusions.

Mary set about preparing lunch. When Ben walked in, she pulled him to the side.

"Ben, what did your shoes look like?"

“Green, with gold stripes. Real bright.”

“I think someone found them.” Her shoulders slumped as his description matched the shoes that Kirk had found.

“Oh, great.”

Mary glanced over her shoulder to make sure that no one was nearby to hear her, then she lowered her voice.

“I think that Kirk found them in the dive shack. Why would they be there?”

“What?” Ben’s eyes widened. “They wouldn’t be. I haven’t even worn them since I got here. I swear, Mom.”

“I believe you, Ben, but you’re going to have to tell Kirk that the shoes he found are most likely yours.”

“Mom, if I do that he’s going to suspect me.”

“Yes, he might, but he’ll suspect you more if he finds out on his own. You have to tell the truth. If you don’t, I will.”

“Mom, seriously. You can’t do this. You know I had nothing to do with this.” He stared into her eyes.

“I know that you didn’t, Ben, but that doesn’t matter. We can’t hide this from Kirk. I didn’t tell him they were yours, because I wasn’t sure. But now that I know, we have to tell him.”

“Mom, please. This is only going to make things worse. At least give me until tomorrow. Maybe I can find out why they were there.”

“I’ll give you until the next time I speak to Kirk, but that’s as much as I can give you. Even that isn’t right. I love you, Ben, more than I can ever say, but part of being your mother is showing you there is a right way to do things, and a wrong way. Withholding information in an investigation is not the right way.”

“I know, Mom.” He shook his head. “But there has to be some kind of explanation. I just need a little time to find it.”

“All right, Ben, do what you can. But be careful. Whoever did this, may have been trying to frame you by putting your shoes in the shack. Don’t you think it could have been Rick?”

“Rick?” Ben drew a sharp breath. “I didn’t even consider that.”

“You two are sharing a room. You thought he took your shoes in the first place.”

“Yes, I did. But I mean, it’s Rick.”

“I’m giving you a new room tonight. I don’t want you sleeping in his room.”

“We should leave things as they are. Maybe he’ll reveal

something if we don't throw up any red flags," Ben suggested.

"Ben, this is your safety we're talking about."

"Rick has no reason to do anything to me, as long as he doesn't think I suspect him. If I change rooms now, he'll suspect that we suspect. Besides, if I'm in his room, I can keep an eye on him. I'll make sure he doesn't go off alone with Cathy."

"All right. Fine for now, but be careful. Understand me?"

"I do." He nodded. "I'll let you know if anything comes up."

"Thanks. Now let's eat lunch."

"Good, I'm starving."

Mary watched her son head for the table. As Rick walked in with Cathy at his side, her heart fluttered. Just how much danger were her children in?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

Suzie knocked on Paul's door. He opened it and smiled as she stepped inside.

"How are you doing?"

"Confused, honestly."

"About the murder?"

"Yes."

"We found it." She pushed the door closed behind her.

"You found what?"

"The shipwreck."

"Are you serious?" He stared into her eyes.

"Yes, I mean, I didn't see it with my own eyes, but the divers I hired confirmed it. They couldn't stay down long, but the shipwreck is definitely there."

"Are you going to tell Kirk about it?"

"I think so." She frowned.

"I thought you said you were going to cooperate with the investigation?"

"Of course I am. This isn't about hiding anything from him. The moment I tell him where the shipwreck is, the murderer might find out and then it might make them panic and hide any evidence or even make them go into hiding."

"You might have to risk that. If you don't you might be the one at risk?" He shook his head. "You're getting too deep into this. You now know where the shipwreck is, that makes you vulnerable."

"It's not as if we found the treasure."

"No, maybe not, but Curtis' killer doesn't know that. If he or she gets wind of you being at the shipwreck, then you might be at risk. You've put yourself in a very vulnerable position here, so what are you going to do to get out of it?"

“I’m not sure yet. I guess I hoped finding the shipwreck would give us some idea of who might have done this. But to be honest we don’t even know if the shipwreck has anything to do with the murder. The murderer could be Hal, it could be Trish, it could be Jim, it could even be Rick. I’m no closer to figuring out who it is.”

“Could it be someone else entirely? Someone from town, or someone that Curtis interacted with that we didn’t know about?”

“It could be, but I don’t think so. I really don’t. He didn’t know many people, and he wasn’t here for that long. My instincts tell me that the people that surrounded him in his last days are the people to look at. I definitely think that’s the best place to look, at least at the moment.”

“Doesn’t that include Cathy and Ben?”

“For Kirk it does. But I know they had nothing to do with any of it. Mary and I have to make sure that Kirk knows that, too.”

“Whatever I can do to help, just tell me.”

“You already are, just by listening.”

“Return the favor, and listen to what I’m saying. When it comes to riches, great men become evil. Please be careful, Suzie.”

“I will be.” She smiled and kissed his cheek. He turned his head and coaxed her into a passionate kiss. When the kiss broke, Suzie looked into his eyes. “What if Jim lied about there being no treasure?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if he lied, and conned his friend out of the goods? What if there was treasure and Jim killed Curtis so he could keep it for himself?”

“I guess that’s possible. And if he did, then Jim would be a very good suspect.”

“Or maybe Curtis lied to Jim about there being no treasure and Jim found out.”

“Maybe. But you said they were friendly. Why would Jim be friendly to him if he believed that Curtis stole the treasure out from under his nose?”

“Maybe because Jim didn’t want Curtis to know that he knew or that he was about to run off with the treasure. Maybe that’s why Curtis was so surprised when Jim showed up. All I know is that if Curtis did take the treasure, then he had to put it somewhere. If that’s the case that might be why he was looking for that cave,” Suzie said.

“Oh yes, that makes sense. He was looking for a place to hide it. But the cave doesn’t exist.”

“Yes, you’re right. It’s just another dead end.”

“Why don’t you and I get some lunch and just enjoy our time together?” Paul asked. “Taking your mind off things might loosen up some new ideas.”

“That sounds good to me.”

Suzie returned to Dune House after lunch, to find it empty, but for Mary, who was finishing up the lunch dishes.

“Mary, how did lunch go?”

“Hal and Trish weren’t here for it, neither was Jim. Just the kids and Rick.” Her voice shuddered as she spoke his name.

“What’s going on? Did you find out something?”

Mary filled her in about Ben’s missing shoes, and blushed as she looked into Suzie’s eyes. “Do you think I’m wrong for keeping it from Kirk?”

“No, I don’t. We both know it wasn’t Ben that put those sneakers in the dive shack. I thought of something while I was with Paul. What if Jim and Curtis found the treasure and Jim killed Curtis for it? Or maybe Curtis lied about finding the treasure? What if he found it, and hid it somewhere? Maybe someone is trying to find it.”

“Oh, that would be a very strong motive for murder.”

“Yes, it would.”

“But how can we know if he found anything?”

“Maybe the divers we hired will know something. They’re experienced with these kinds of things. I’m going to give them a call.”

“Okay. Now is a good time, there’s no one else in the house.”

“I’m calling now.” Suzie sat down at the dining room table and

dialed the number for Joe, one of the divers. When Joe answered she held her breath for a moment. He might tell her she was crazy for asking. “Joe, I was wondering. Do you think it’s possible that there was treasure on that shipwreck?”

“I’m sure there was at one point, I did some research on the ship and it’s a high-end ship known to have transported large amounts of wealth, but it’s not there now.”

“So someone took it?”

“It looks that way. There’s nothing reported on the registry of finds either. I checked when we got back. So whoever took it, kept it to themselves. Any finds are supposed to be reported. If the shipwreck is foreign, it’s possible for the country it belonged to, to have a claim to it. Without reporting it, it’s hard to sell anything that’s found.”

“When I hired you, you said you would have to file paperwork to dive. Does everyone have to do that?”

“It’s a safety measure and it is highly recommended. Some people don’t file the paperwork, but most do. If you dive in a dangerous location without filing you can be at risk of losing your license.”

“Thanks Joe.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t find what you were looking for.”

“That’s all right. I appreciate your hard work.” She hung up the phone and looked into Mary’s eyes. “There was most likely treasure there once, someone took it.”

“Curtis?”

“It’s the only lead we have. I think there is a way we can find out. I need to make a few calls. You and the kids go out today, get away from all of this. When you come home, we’ll check in about the case.”

“Suzie, how can I relax and have a good time with them when I know at any moment Kirk might pull up and arrest Ben?”

“Don’t worry about Kirk. He’s on our side. Just enjoy your time with your kids.”

“I’ll try. But with Rick being a suspect it’s hard.”

“I know it is. Maybe he’ll let something slip while you’re out and relaxing.”

“That’s a good idea. I didn’t think of that.”

“Don’t worry, if anything big happens, I’ll let you know.”

“Okay, thanks Suzie.”

As Mary walked away, Suzie began to search on her phone. Once she found the right number to call, she placed the call. She used some of her skills that she had learned as an investigative journalist and about thirty minutes later she had access to online records of all of the dives in the area of the shipwreck, including the dates, and the divers. It was a tedious process, but once she narrowed down the dates she was able to come up with a list of names. Right away she noticed that Curtis' name was on the list, twice, about two weeks apart. The first date was a week before he checked in at Dune House, the second was a week after. So he'd visited the shipwreck area at least twice. Did he manage to locate the shipwreck on the first visit? Did he go back to retrieve the treasure?

It was hard to decipher what his purpose was without more information. She skimmed the list a little further. When she noticed one name in particular, her heart lurched. R. Norris. Norris was a common last name, but could it really be a coincidence that Rick arrived at Dune House just in time for Curtis to be killed? He knew how to dive. But how could he possibly know about the treasure? She checked the dates that he registered for a dive in the area and saw that it was a few days after Curtis' last visit. If R. Norris did stand for the same Rick Norris, then he might have visited the area not long before he traveled to Dune House with Cathy. Was that why he asked to come along with her? It made her uneasy to even consider it. If it was true, which seemed far-fetched, then Cathy could be in danger, as well as Mary and Ben. She called Mary, but her voicemail picked up.

"Mary, call me when you get this message. There's something we need to discuss."

When she hung up the phone she skimmed through the other names on the roster. None of the other names seemed familiar, but she saved a copy of the list just in case. Jim was not on the list, but it was still possible that he had visited without registering. She guessed that Curtis wouldn't risk diving without registering, because if he lost his license he wouldn't be able to teach. Then again if he'd found the treasure, he wouldn't have needed to worry about money. Confused, she decided to take a walk along the beach to try to clear her mind. The salty air refreshed her, but it did nothing to help her untangle the case. Ahead of her she caught sight of Hal and Trish. They were settled in beach chairs with a cooler

between them. It could have been a cozy moment between husband and wife, but she could sense the tension between them as she approached. The wind carried their conversation towards her before she was close enough for them to notice.

"We should leave, that's what I think."

"We can't leave now, if we do you'll look guilty," Trish said.

"I'll look guilty? I didn't do anything, so why would I look guilty?"

"You keep saying you didn't do anything, but that doesn't matter. You know how these things work, you could end up in prison for something that you didn't do. If we leave, you're going to be putting a target on your back."

"Oh, bigger than the one you painted there by flirting with the idiot in the first place?" He snarled his words.

Trish shook her head. "You're crazy. It's not my fault you're crazy."

"You made me that way." He kicked some sand into the air. "Do you really think I don't know about the kiss?"

Suzie froze. She was close enough for them to notice if they turned around and saw her, but she didn't want to interrupt the conversation. She edged up along the sand away from the water, but still close enough to hear them.

"What?"

"I know. I saw you kiss him. I chose not to do anything about it, because I knew you were just waiting for any reason to leave me."

"That's not true, it's not, Hal."

"Then why did you kiss him?" He stood up from the beach chair, and in that moment he caught sight of Suzie. He flung the beach chair towards the water and shouted at Trish. "You did this, not me! You want to stay? Then you stay. I'm leaving!" He stalked off down the beach. Trish stood up and retrieved the beach chair.

"I'm sorry, Suzie. If there's any damage to it, I'll pay for it."

"You don't have to do that."

"I guess you heard all of that." She wiped at her eyes to hide the tears that Suzie could clearly see. "I've made quite a mess, haven't I?"

"It's not your fault, Trish."

"How can it not be?" She closed her eyes. "I'm so embarrassed, I guess you know everything?"

"I know that sometimes people do impulsive things."

“I wish I had never done it. I don’t know why I did. I guess, I’ve just been lonely, and I thought maybe Curtis would be the cure for that.”

“Was he?” Suzie met her eyes.

“Do you mean did I have an affair with him?”

“It’s not really any of my business.”

“No.” She wiped at her eyes again. “He was so kind, but he turned me down. I’ve never felt so complimented by someone who turned me down. I was a fool, and he didn’t attack me for it. He was gentle with my feelings.”

“I’m glad. Curtis was a good man.”

“Hal is, too. I know it doesn’t seem that way, but he really is. I think part of me did flirt with Curtis to make him jealous. I just wanted him to pay more attention to me. Now, I wish I’d never done any of it. Hal could never kill anyone, I know that, but the police don’t, do they?”

“I can assure you that the officer investigating the case only wants the truth, and he won’t accept anything less.”

“I hope that’s true, because Hal didn’t do this. You believe me don’t you, Suzie?”

“I don’t know what to believe, Trish.” Suzie studied her for a long moment. “When was the last time Hal saw Curtis?”

“I’m not really sure.”

“Okay. I’ll take care of the chairs. You head on back. Okay?”

“Yes, thank you, Suzie.”

As she walked down the beach Suzie dialed Kirk’s number. After three rings it went to voicemail.

“Kirk, this is Suzie. If you’re looking at Hal as a suspect, you should know that he is planning to leave as soon as possible.” She hung up the phone and slid it back into her pocket. It felt awful to rat out one of her guests, but it would feel much worse if Curtis’ killer managed to escape.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15

When Suzie reached Dune House she went through the routine of checking linens, tidying the common areas, and getting some things prepared for dinner. Just as she was about to put the chicken in the oven, the front door swung open.

"Suzie?"

She turned to greet Kirk. "Hi, just give me a second." After she slid the chicken into the oven she turned back to him. "You got my message?"

"Yes, I did. Is Hal here?"

"Not right now. But I think they will be back for dinner."

"Good, maybe I'll stay, too. If that's okay?"

"Yes, of course. That might be a good idea. Listen, I need to show you something."

"All right." He sat down at the table.

"This is what I've found." Suzie slid the list across the table to him. She had decided that Paul was right and she should tell Kirk about the shipwreck. "I know there is a shipwreck in this area, it has been confirmed by some divers, and I also know that Curtis was there the week before he came here, and the week after. I also know that a R. Norris registered to dive in the same area, just a few days before Cathy and Rick came to visit."

"Yes, but we can't be certain that it's the same person. R, could stand for anything."

"We thought maybe you could do some deeper digging to see if it was Rick. But at this point, and please don't laugh at me, we believe that Curtis might have found treasure in that shipwreck."

"What?" He tightened his lips for a moment, then cleared his throat. "Okay, I didn't laugh. Why would you come to that conclusion?"

“He was researching how to sell antiques and artifacts. He asked Cathy about how to evaluate artifacts to determine their age and worth. So obviously he had something that he wanted to evaluate.”

“Or he could have been brushing up on his skills for future dives.”

“Sure, he could have been. But why brush up on those skills before he found the treasure? The diver I spoke to said that anything found has to be registered in case another country has a claim to it. Maybe Curtis was trying to get around that?”

“Okay.” Kirk nodded. “That is interesting. So you believe that Curtis found treasure, and then what?”

“The treasure isn’t with the shipwreck anymore. Either someone took it, or Curtis moved it.”

“Or it was never there in the first place. That’s always a possibility isn’t it?”

“Yes, of course it is. But if it was there, then it serves as good motive for people to want to kill him.”

“Yes, it does. Do you think Jim knew about it?”

“There is a record of Jim diving with Curtis a few months before, but not the two most recent dives.”

“Isn’t it possible that Jim went diving with him and just didn’t register?”

“Yes, it is possible. But he hasn’t mentioned it to us,” Suzie said.

“And not to me either. This is very interesting information. Unfortunately, we can’t prove that there was ever actually treasure at the shipwreck, but we may not need to. I’m going to interview everyone again, and see if this new information stirs anything up.”

“Ben and Cathy, too?”

“Yes Suzie. I have to be thorough.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “I’ll let them know you need to speak with them. They’re out right now, oh never mind.” Suzie tilted her head towards the front door as Cathy, Ben, Rick, and Mary walked in. Ben was dripping wet from swimming. Kirk stood up as they walked further in.

“Suzie? What’s going on?” Ben looked from Kirk, to his mother, then to Suzie. “Did they find Curtis’ killer?”

“No Ben, not yet,” Suzie said.

“I’m here to ask everyone a few more questions.” Kirk looked between the three.

“Oh sure.” Ben nodded. “Can I change first?”

“Yes, go ahead.” Kirk looked over at Rick. “I need to speak with you again, Rick.”

“Why?” Rick narrowed his eyes. “I’ve already spoken to you several times.”

“I’m just trying to get to the bottom of what happened to Curtis. I’d like your cooperation.”

“I have cooperated. I’ve done enough.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “I don’t have anything else to say.”

“I have some new questions. If you could just step in here?” Kirk opened the door to the study.

“Rick, it’s okay. I’m sure he’s going to question all of us.” Cathy touched Rick’s arm. “Just answer his questions, it will be fine.”

“Yes, I am going to question everyone. I have some new information, and I just want to go over some things to see if it sparks anything. Really, I just need your help.”

“Right, until you find something that you don’t like about me, and decide to put some handcuffs on me.”

“I’m already not that fond of you, Rick.” Kirk smiled. “And, I still haven’t put handcuffs on you. Just try to relax, a few questions and you’ll be on your way.”

“This is ridiculous.” Rick started to turn away, but Cathy patted his arm and met his eyes.

“It’s all right, Rick.”

“Fine.” He stared at her for a moment, then followed Kirk into the study.

“Oh Mom, he’s going to hate me for this.”

“No, he’s not.” Mary rubbed her back. “If he’s the kind of man that you think he is or hope he is, he will understand. Did you know about these problems he has?”

“I didn’t realize they were this intense. He mentioned that there were some things that happened to him while in the service that made it difficult for him to deal with authority, but I had no idea that it was to this extent.”

“Isn’t it a little concerning?” Mary searched her eyes.

“It’s concerning because I didn’t realize it was so much of an issue. He’s needed my help this whole time and I’ve been so caught up in us being together that I didn’t even notice.”

“Cathy, I know that you’re fond of him, but it seems like he has a few more burdens to carry than you expected.”

“Is that a polite way of telling me that you think I shouldn’t be

with him? Because he's been hurt?"

"That's not what I mean at all, sweetheart. I'm just surprised, I know you're surprised, too."

"He's a good man, Mom. I know he is. Even with all that he is struggling with, deep down, he's good."

"And what if he killed Curtis?" Mary's hands clenched. "What if it turns out that he is guilty?"

"He's not, I know that he's not. He would never do something like that."

"Not even if treasure was involved?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Kirk is going to ask you about this, but Suzie and I think that Curtis might have found treasure. Real treasure. There's some evidence that Rick might have been diving in the same area where the shipwreck was found. Do you know where he was on this date?" She showed her the date on her phone.

"This is silly. I'm sure he was at college, with me." She frowned as she thought for a moment. "Actually I'm not sure that he was. He did take a few days vacation around that time. I can't be certain of the date."

"So he could have been there."

"I thought you said he was there?"

"We only have an initial and a surname."

"So you don't have proof?"

"No, I don't. But I have good reason to suspect. Not long after, he invited himself along with you here. That seems a little coincidental doesn't it?"

"It seems like a stretch, Mom. He was excited to meet you. Now I feel guilty for ever bringing him here. I never expected this from you."

"Cathy, please don't be upset with me. I am only trying to protect you."

"I'm old enough to protect myself now. I don't need you to tell me who I can or can't be with."

"I don't think that's what I was telling you. I just want you to be cautious. Please." She took her hand and met her eyes. "I'm on your side. I'm not trying to tell you what to do, I promise. Honestly, I'm sorry that this whole trip has been impacted by this. I trust your judgement, and I do like Rick, I think he probably is a good person. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

“I appreciate that, Mom, but if you really believe he could have done this, then I don’t think we have anything to talk about.”

The door to the study banged open and Rick stalked out of the room. “I have nothing else to say!” He headed straight for the door without even looking at Cathy.

“Rick!”

“Cathy, will you come in here with me?” Kirk stood in the doorway.

“What did you do to him?”

“I just asked him a few questions, just like I’m going to ask you. Mary do you want to join us?”

“No, she doesn’t need to.” Cathy stepped into the study and closed the door behind her.

Suzie wrapped her arm around Mary and pulled her close. “Try not to worry. She’s just spreading her wings.”

“I get that, I do. I just don’t want her to spread them with a murderer.”

“Did Kirk leave?” Ben joined them near the door of the study.

“No, he’s in there with Cathy.”

“Oh okay.”

“Do you want me to go in with you, Ben?”

“No, it’s all right, Mom. I’ll be fine. You should sit down, get off your knees.”

“I’m fine.”

“Really Mom, sit down.” He gestured to the dining room table. “Relax, I’ll get you some tea.”

Suzie nodded and gave her friend’s shoulder a pat. “Do what your son says, he’s looking out for you.”

“Okay, okay.” Mary sat down in her chair and sighed. As Ben walked into the kitchen, Mary leaned close. “I’m going to have to tell Kirk about Ben’s shoes.”

“Not unless he asks.”

“Suzie.”

“Mary. We know Ben didn’t do this. No need to shine a spotlight on him.”

“Still, it doesn’t seem right.”

“Here you go, Mom. I made some for you, too, Suzie.”

“Thanks, Ben.”

“I appreciate your time, Cathy.” Kirk walked her out of the study.

“Just remember what I said, Ben.” Mary frowned.

“Sure.” Ben wiped his hands nervously on his jeans. As he disappeared into the study, Cathy walked out through the front door without a word to either of them.

“She’s furious with me.” Mary frowned.

“She’ll come around, don’t worry.” Suzie patted her hand. When Ben came out of the study, his face was flushed. He headed for the stairs without a word. Kirk walked up to the table and looked between the two women.

“So, you didn’t know who those shoes belonged to, did you?”

“Not when you asked, I didn’t.” Mary gripped her cup of tea tight in her hands.

“But, after you asked Ben you discovered it didn’t you?”

“Kirk, you have to understand.”

“I do understand. I commend you for allowing Ben to speak up for himself. He was brave, and came forward with honesty. Of course I have to record this. It doesn’t amount to enough for an arrest just yet.”

“Did he tell you he has no idea how his shoes got there?”

“Yes, he did. I made a note of that, and that others had access to his shoes. We’ll see what it amounts to. Take it one step at a time.”

“Thanks Kirk.” Suzie breathed a sigh of relief.

“No idea where Jim is?” Kirk asked.

“No sorry,” Suzie said.

“I’ll see if I can find him around town. I’ll update you soon.”

As Kirk left the house, Mary and Suzie locked eyes.

“We have to get this settled, and fast,” Mary said.

“Yes, we do. If only we could find the treasure itself, maybe that would tell us something.”

“Wait, you said that Curtis was looking for a cave, maybe to hide the treasure.”

“Right, but the cave doesn’t exist. It was a story the locals invented to keep people away from their island,” Suzie replied.

“So the cave doesn’t exist, but the island does?”

“Oh! Mary! That’s genius!”

“Do you really think so?” Mary’s eyes widened. “It was just a wild guess.”

“Well, that wild guess is the only thing we have right now.” Suzie glanced at her watch. “I’m going to make some calls and see if we can get a boat.”

“What about Paul?”

“He’s out fishing again I think, just for a few hours. I’ll see if I can contact him first before I try and get a boat to take us out there.”

“Okay. I’m going to go check on Ben, let me know when you find a boat.”

“I will.”

Suzie tried Paul but he didn’t answer so she presumed he was still out on the water. After a few phone calls to try and get a boat, she came up with nothing. Most of the people who had a boat were tied up in jobs, or unavailable for other reasons. She recalled a friend of Paul’s she’d met a few months back. He was a nice enough guy, and Paul seemed to trust him. They had grown up in Garber together. However, she didn’t know his number. He might be out at sea but it was worth a shot to try him. She sent a text to Mary.

Let’s head down to the docks.

Mary appeared a few minutes later, her forehead creased in concern.

“How’s Ben?” Suzie led her out of Dune House and into the parking lot.

“Not good. Apparently Kirk put quite a scare into him. He said that he’s having Ben’s shoes DNA tested for DNA that doesn’t match Ben’s. He also said that Ben’s fingerprints were found in the dive shack, and on Curtis’ equipment.”

“But that shouldn’t be surprising, Ben was one of his students,” Suzie said.

“I know it shouldn’t be, but this is a path that Kirk is following. We need to find out the truth as quickly as possible.”

“We’re going to.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16

Suzie drove down to the docks and parked in the far lot. After checking that Paul's boat wasn't docked she walked along the dock with Mary until she found Shawn's boat. He was on the deck scrubbing down some equipment when she spotted him.

"Shawn!" Suzie smiled and waved to him. He looked a little confused at first, and she realized that he didn't recognize her. "Suzie, Paul's girlfriend, remember?"

"Oh right, hi Suzie." He smiled.

"This is my friend, Mary. We were wondering if you might be able to do us a favor?"

"What?" His eyes narrowed slightly.

"We want to find the secret island, Bucky's Island."

"Oh, why would you want to find that place?" He laughed. "That's for teenagers."

"We have our reasons. Will you take us out please?"

"Why didn't you ask Paul?"

"He's out fishing at the moment."

"All right, I'll take you out. But I don't want Paul having a problem with me. So if any of this goes sideways, you're going to tell him why, not me."

"Don't worry. Paul won't care."

"Okay, let's head out." He helped them both onto the boat.

"Is it far off shore?"

"Not at all. Bucky's Island has been a local secret for a long time."

"I can't believe I never heard of it until a few days ago." Suzie raised an eyebrow.

"No, you wouldn't have, you didn't grow up here. Only locals have ever heard of it, and not even all of the locals. Mostly just kids

that grew up with houses on the beach itself. It's basically a tiny little island, well we call it an island, but it's not even big enough to be considered an island. Anyway, it's where the teens would go to hang out when I was younger. These days it's mostly empty because of all of the new rules about teens and watercraft. Once in a while some locals will go out there for a picnic or to hang out, but there are so many nicer places to go, that it isn't used much. It won't take us long to get there."

Suzie watched as the docks grew distant. She could only hope that the secret island would be the lead that they needed. About twenty minutes later Mary pointed across the water.

"Is that it?" She shielded her eyes.

"It must be." Suzie saw the tiny bit of land with a small amount of foliage to separate it from the sea.

"Looks empty as usual." Shawn pulled up as close as he could to the shore. "It's too shallow for me to get any closer. Do you want to come back with a raft?"

"No, we can wade our way in. Right Mary?"

"Uh, sure." Mary nodded.

"I'll go first." Suzie climbed down the ladder on the side of the boat and into the water, then she turned back to help Mary. "Here Mary." Suzie offered her a hand as she tried to climb down from the ship.

"No, it's okay I can do it." Mary waved her off. In the process she slid down the last rung of the ladder and landed with a splash in the shallow water. "Ugh. Suzie, stop laughing and help me up!"

"I'm sorry, it was just so cute when you gasped. Are you okay?" She helped her to her feet. Once steady, Mary rolled her eyes.

"Yes, I'm okay. Just bruised pride as usual."

"Well, we're both soaked now, we might as well go get sandy." Suzie led her through the water to the shore.

"I wish I was as agile as you."

"A few more doctor's visits might help."

"Now you sound like Ben."

"Your son has a point, Mary. You can't ignore that pain forever."

"I can for a little while longer." She grinned. "I'm holding out for the cute surgeon."

"I bet you are." Suzie laughed. "All right, we're here. Now what?"

"Well, without a diver we can't search the water, but I guess we

can take a look around the island. Maybe Curtis left something behind that will give us a clue."

"That would be nice. It's not like we have much territory to cover." As Suzie stood at the edge of the water, she could clearly see the shore on the other side of the island. There were a few trees and bushes, but not enough to hide much. As they picked their way through the island, she became discouraged.

"Honestly, Mary, I think this was a mistake. There's nothing here to find. Maybe Curtis just came out here to blow off steam. One of the locals probably told him about it."

"That's possible, but I don't think we should give up just yet. We didn't look over there." She pointed to a section of the island which was furthest from where the boat was anchored. Suzie nodded and followed Mary's lead. As they approached Suzie noticed strange dips and rises in the sand. She paused beside a pile of large gray rocks. They seemed out of place on the island to begin with, but the way they were stacked seemed even more odd.

"What do you think this is about?" Suzie stared at the rocks.

"Let's see." Mary moved one of the rocks, then another. Suzie joined her, and soon they were almost through the pile. When Suzie moved the last of the rocks, Mary stared down into a deep hole beneath it.

"Oh my! Suzie!" Mary looked up from the hole. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes, it is." Suzie looked over her shoulder to ensure that there was no one else on the island with them. When she looked back down into the hole she was startled again by the pile of coins at the bottom. There were scattered gems and necklaces as well, but the coins took up the majority of the space. "Curtis must have moved the treasure here to keep it safe. He probably thought no one would ever look for it here."

"We seriously just found buried treasure?" Mary shook her head.

"Sh! Not so loud. We don't want Shawn to hear us."

"Why, do you think he would try to take it?"

"It's very possible that those coins are worth a large amount of money. When it comes to riches, you can never predict who is going to do what to get to them. So yes, I do think it's very possible."

"What are we going to do? Should we take them? Should we call Kirk?"

"No." Suzie peered out over the water, then began to move the

rocks back into place to hide the treasure. “Not until we find out who killed Curtis.”

“Why?” Mary frowned.

“Because the moment we tell Kirk about this treasure, everyone will care about it. He’ll have to process it as evidence, and there is a chance that everyone in town will hear about it. Any chance we have of getting a confession out of the killer will be gone. If we keep this to ourselves, just you and me, then we can decide when we want to reveal it. If we do it the right way, we might be able to flush out the killer.”

“Okay, I think I understand. Here, let me help.” Mary shoved a few of the rocks back into place as well.

“Remember, not a word to Shawn.”

“I’ll remember.”

When they waded back out to the boat, Shawn helped them up onto it.

“How did it go, lady pirates?” He grinned.

“You were right, there was nothing out there. I think we made a mistake.”

“Oh well, at least you got a nice boat ride, right?”

“Right.” Suzie nodded. She and Mary sat on the bench seat closest to the back of the boat. It was still hard for Suzie to believe that they found the treasure. A part of her wondered if it might have actually been some kind of prank that one of the local kids played. Maybe those coins weren’t as real as they looked. When they reached the dock and Suzie stepped off the boat, she caught sight of Paul. He held out his hand to her. She took it with a smile.

“I can’t believe you would cheat on me.” He did not return the smile.

“What?” She stared at him.

“Seriously Suzie, did you really think you were going to get away with this?”

“Hey Paul, it wasn’t like that at all, I swear.” Shawn stepped off the boat after Mary.

“It sure looks like what I think it is.” Paul looked from Shawn to Suzie. “You went out on another man’s boat? What’s wrong with my boat?” He grinned.

Suzie relaxed and laughed. “Sorry Paul, I didn’t know when you’d be back.”

“No need to apologize.” He nodded to Shawn. “Thanks for

taking her out."

"Oh sure, anytime." Shawn breathed a sigh of relief.

"I think I scared him." Paul laughed as he walked with Mary and Suzie along the dock. Suzie longed to tell him about what they found, but she thought he would think she was crazy, and if she wasn't crazy then she didn't want to put him in danger.

"So, can you join us for dinner tonight?" Suzie looked into Paul's eyes.

"I would love that." Paul nodded. "But I have to go out again on the boat tonight, so I might have to leave dinner early, is that okay?"

"Absolutely!" Suzie smiled.

"Great." He kissed her cheek, waved to Mary, and walked back off to his boat. The moment Suzie and Mary were alone in the car they could only talk about the treasure and what it could mean. The entire way back to Dune House they debated how the treasure could help them find the killer. Once in the kitchen with two cups of coffee they continued to discuss it.

"Well, our best guess at this point is that whoever killed Curtis was after the treasure. So why don't we let the killer show himself, or herself?" Mary fiddled with her cup of coffee.

"How?" Suzie leaned forward.

"All of the suspects probably now know that there was a shipwreck and possibly treasure. They've all been questioned about their knowledge of it, and so they can assume that Curtis was in possession of it if it existed."

"Okay." Suzie nodded. "I'm listening."

"What they don't know, is that we know where it is. No one knows. Right? Not even Paul?'

"Right. Not even the kids?"

"Right. So, why don't we let it slip that we know where the treasure is? Whoever killed Curtis is likely to come after us."

"Wait, even if we ignore for the moment just how dangerous that would be, we can't know that the killer will come after us. It's possible that Curtis was killed out of jealousy, by either Hal or Trish," Suzie said.

"It is possible, and if no one comes after the treasure then we may want to lean more towards Hal and Trish. No matter what we're going to get some kind of response. Either someone will come after us to try to find the treasure, or no one will, in which case we

can zero in more on Hal and Trish."

"What about Rick and Jim? Do you really think they'd come after us?"

"If one of them is a murderer, then yes." Mary frowned. "I know it's a risky idea. Usually I wouldn't even consider it. But Kirk is focusing in on Ben, and I want this settled once and for all."

"Then we will have to be very careful."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 17

After dinner Suzie washed the dishes. She had the kitchen window open. As Ben approached the back door, she could hear his conversation with someone on the phone.

“I told you, I’ll take care of it. You can trust me. I have more than enough. Just tell him that this needs to be it. I want him to leave me alone after this.”

Suzie closed her eyes as she listened to Ben’s words. She didn’t want to suspect him, but it was hard not to. How could Ben, who was strapped for cash suddenly have enough to pay off the debt to his loan shark? Was it possible that Curtis told him about the treasure? It made her feel sick to even consider it. When he stepped through the back door she focused on the dishes.

“Hey Ben.” She smiled at him.

“Hey Aunt Suzie. Want some help with those?”

“No, it’s okay. How are you doing?”

“All right.” He shrugged. “Just starting to wonder when all of this is going to be settled.”

“Yes, I think we all are. Listen, we’re having a bonfire tonight. I’d like for you to be there for it.”

“Sure. I love a bonfire. Want help with the fire?”

“I’ll let you know.”

“Great. I’ll let Cathy and Rick know.”

Suzie stared after him as he walked away. She was tempted to question him about his phone conversation, but she decided against it. They would know the truth soon enough. As she finished the dishes she realized the only person who wasn’t at dinner was Jim. Paul and Kirk had spent some time on the porch, then Kirk left early. She had no idea what they discussed, but Paul appeared less than pleased as he kissed her goodnight and headed home. She

purposely didn't tell him about the bonfire. She wanted him as far from danger as possible.

Now she needed to find Jim, but she had no idea where he was. It was still light outside. He could be diving for all she knew, but she did see him walk out onto the beach earlier and hadn't noticed him return. Her heart fluttered as she thought about being out on the isolated beach so far away from Dune House. The beaches in town were more popular for tourists and residents alike. The more isolated beaches tended to be rocky and not as friendly to visitors.

The further she walked, the more she wondered if she was mistaken about Jim coming out this way. Even if he was diving there should be some sign of him being there. She was just about to turn back, when she heard a splash from behind a pile of rocks. The rocks were stacked high enough to shield from view whatever was happening beyond them. She held her breath as she crept forward. She wanted to see Jim, before he saw her. As she rounded the rocks she got a full view of him, as he slung water from his hair and rose up out of the water. Her eyes widened as she took in the sight of every inch of his skin. Jim was a very fit man, and though she hadn't noticed before, she now realized that he was quite muscular as well. She was so stunned by discovering him in the nude that she couldn't look away as he began to turn back towards the shore.

"Oh!" He laughed. "Suzie, you startled me." He covered himself and backed up towards the rocks. "I didn't expect anyone to be out here."

"I'm sorry." She blinked as she realized she was staring, and backed away from the edge of the water. Only then did she notice his clothes neatly folded on one of the rocks.

"Would you mind?" He gestured to a towel on the rock beside his clothes. Her heart raced as she did her best not to look at him. She grabbed the towel and held it out to him as she looked away. "I'm sorry about this, really. I expected to be alone." He wrapped the towel around his waist and walked out of the water. She was so flustered she could barely bring herself to speak, but finally managed to put some words together.

"This is not a nude beach, Jim."

"I realize that. Are you going to call the cops on me?" He laughed. The laughter faded when she didn't respond. "Suzie, I'm sorry. I'm used to being on beaches where nudity is allowed. Honestly, whenever I'm feeling down, I go for a swim in the nude.

It's so refreshing. Have you ever tried it?"

"That's not the point."

"Hm. You should try it some time. It feels like every trouble you have is being washed away. Cleansed."

She glanced over at him for a moment. Was the swim his way of cleansing himself after murdering his friend? "I'm sure it is, but I'm familiar with what a jellyfish sting feels like."

"Oh absolutely." He laughed. "I've experienced that, too. But, it's still worth it. Anyway, I'm sorry again. I didn't mean to disturb you this way."

"It's all right."

"What are you doing all the way out here anyway? I hunted this place down thinking it would be private enough."

"I was actually looking for you."

"Well, you certainly found me." He raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, I did." Suzie laughed and dared to meet his eyes. His sparkled, as if he was more amused by her discomfort than by getting caught. "We're having a bonfire tonight, for all of our guests. It's just a way we'd like to relieve some of the tension in the house, and also to honor Curtis. He loved to have bonfires on the beach."

"Yes, he was always a firebug." He nodded, and the amusement in his eyes faded. "I do miss that man."

"I'm sure you do, Jim. I hope you'll join us tonight, at sunset."

"Yes, I think I will."

"Great. I'll see you then." She cleared her throat.

"Less of me." Jim winked. "I promise."

"Yes, that would probably be best." Suzie felt her cheeks heat up as she turned away. It was hard to get the image of Jim rising out of the water out of her mind. However, the more she thought about his behavior the more strange she thought it was. Was it really normal to swim in the nude when you were grieving for a friend? She'd done some wild things in her life, but those two activities didn't seem to blend together to her. She reminded herself not to judge.

Mary walked into the dining room and spotted Hal and Trish out on the deck on the side of the house. Since the door had been repaired the space was being utilized more. She opened the door to the deck just as Hal wrapped his arms around his wife.

"You know I'll always love you." He stared into her eyes. "No matter what you put me through."

"You're going to have to forgive me properly one day, Hal."

"Probably." He looked up as Mary stepped through the door. "Mary." He nodded as he stepped away from Trish.

"I'm sorry to interrupt. I wanted to let you know that we're going to have a bonfire tonight and I would like for you to be there. This is still your vacation, even though it's been hindered by tragedy. I feel like we've all been waiting for the murder to be solved, but we think this is a nice way to honor Curtis, and I think we are still entitled to enjoy some of the beauty that this place has to offer. Will you be there?"

"I don't know." Trish looked out over the water. "It might be awkward."

"It won't be. It's about joining together. I know the investigation is still ongoing, but just for one night I want to see if we can let go of that, and bask in the moonlight. At least come and see how it feels. If it isn't comfortable you can always leave."

"Won't that make me look even more guilty?" Hal rolled his eyes. "It seems to me that if I sneeze I'm one step away from handcuffs."

"That's the point of the bonfire. To help everyone relax a little, and to remind us that we're all here to enjoy each other's company and honor Curtis."

"I'll think about it." Hal took Trish's hand. "It might be nice to spend some time beside a fire on the beach, don't you think?"

"I think it's ridiculous." Trish turned back to face Mary. "We're talking about the same beach where Curtis died. Don't you think

that's a little morbid?"

"I don't think so. Curtis loved the water. I think it would be a nice way to honor him."

"Even if the killer is among those honoring him?" Trish narrowed her eyes. "Someone here did it."

"We don't know that. All we know is that Curtis lost his life long before he should have."

"I guess you're right about that." Trish shrugged. "We'll be there."

"All right, good." Mary smiled at them both, then walked around to the front porch. As she reached it, Suzie climbed up the front steps.

"Well?"

"I've spoken to Trish, and Hal. I think they are going to be there."

"I spoke to Ben and he is going to talk to Cathy and Rick."

"Great," Mary said. "Did you find Jim?"

"Yes I did." Suzie hoped her cheeks weren't flushed as she recalled the way she found him. "He said he would be there."

"What is it? Did something happen?" Mary studied her.

"Let's just say, Jim has a very strange way of grieving. I also invited Louis. I thought he might enjoy it and the group might relax more to have someone there that wasn't staying at Dune House and isn't a suspect in the crime, as far as we know at least."

"Are you sure we shouldn't invite Kirk?"

"No way, we can't invite him. If we do, everyone is going to clam up. No, I think we have everyone right where we want them to be. Now we just need marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate."

"What?" Mary blinked.

"You can't have a bonfire without s'mores, now can you?"

"Good point. I'll round up some sticks we can use to toast them."

As the two walked into Dune House, Suzie glanced back over her shoulder. She could see Jim approaching along the beach. He walked with ease as the light breeze from the water fluttered his unbuttoned shirt.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 18

Just as the sun began to set, Suzie and Mary huddled in the kitchen.

"Are you sure about this, Suzie?"

"Yes. I think it's the best idea we could come up with, and we can't waste any more time on trying to come up with something. Kirk is not going to be able to make or convince everyone to stay much longer, and once everyone begins to scatter, it's possible that the case is going to go cold."

"That would be terrible."

"Yes, it would. So we try this tonight, and see if it's going to lead us to discovering something. If it doesn't, we haven't lost anything."

"Okay, well the s'more supplies are ready." Mary glanced at the sky. "It's just about sunset. Are we ready?"

"Yes. You have the coordinates on your phone already, right?"

"Yes. I left them on the screen so whoever picks up the phone will be able to find them right away."

"Good. Remember to leave it in plain sight, but try to block it as you walk away so that no one will notice it right away and remind you to pick it up."

"That shouldn't be a problem. My hips are big enough they can hide anything."

"Mary!" Suzie shook her head.

"Sorry." She laughed. "I'm nervous. I get silly when I'm nervous."

"It's okay. I'm nervous, too. Let's try to go into this with as open minds as possible. I know that we have our own suspicions, but hopefully tonight will give us a solid lead."

"Is the shack all set up?"

"Yes it is, and so is the camera."

"Perfect." Mary smiled. "Who knew we could be so tech savvy?"

“Louis might have helped.”

“But we knew to ask him for help, that’s something, right?” Mary laughed.

“Hmm, I think I could get used to you being nervous. You’re quite funny.”

“Ugh, if you could feel how fast my heart is racing you wouldn’t wish it on me, trust me.”

“Just try to relax. We know what we’re doing, and we’re going to be perfectly safe.”

“I’m trying.” Mary nodded.

“I’m going to go get the fire started.”

“Okay I’ll be down in a little bit with drinks and supplies.”

“Great.” Suzie stepped out of the house and walked down towards the beach. It didn’t take long for her to get the bonfire set up. However, as the flames began to crackle, her own heart started to race. She wasn’t nervous about the plan working, she was nervous about the plan failing. If no one took the bait, they would still have no solid suspect, and Curtis’ death might hang over all of them for the rest of their lives.

The flames crackled in the silence that filled the air. No one was interested in talking. The glow of the fire painted each face with sinister shadows. It was difficult not to think about who the killer might be. Suzie stirred the embers, then looked up at the group.

“So, I guess everyone knows that we think that Curtis was treasure hunting.”

“Not surprising.” Jim grinned. “He always believed he would find something.”

“Do you think he ever did?” Mary looked up from the fire.

“I don’t think so, I think if he did he would have told me about it. What do you think?” Jim asked.

“What would I know about it?” Mary shrugged and laughed nervously.

“Sh, Mary!” Suzie frowned.

“Uh oh, you two are up to something.” Ben grinned. “I can always tell when you’re hiding something.”

“That’s what he thinks.” Cathy shook her head. “Mom and Suzie are just trying to lighten the mood and get our minds off the tragedy.”

“Is it working?” Suzie glanced over at Hal and Trish who were huddled together. “I know that this has been difficult for all of us. But maybe the romantic idea of treasure being hidden somewhere nearby will lighten the mood.”

“Maybe.” Trish sighed. “But I could care less about treasure. I’m more interested in time travel. I’d love to correct my mistakes.”

“I think we all would.” Ben nodded and added some kindling to the fire.

“I heard a rumor that Curtis might have hidden treasure somewhere nearby.” Mary fiddled with her phone. “Suzie and I are looking into it.”

“That’s silly.” Jim laughed. “If Curtis found treasure, he wouldn’t have hidden it, he would have flaunted it. Where do these rumors say the treasure might be?”

“Not a word, Mary, that’s between us.” Suzie pointed a finger in her direction.

“Suzie, it’s not a big deal. It’s not like we’re actually going to be able to find it.”

“We might. You don’t know. We have the coordinates…”

“Suzie, now who’s saying too much?”

“You’re right, let’s have s’mores.” Suzie began to prepare the snacks.

“Wait a minute, are you saying you have an idea of where the treasure is.” Rick sat forward. “Do you know that some divers spend decades looking for treasure? If you have reason to believe the treasure might be hidden around here somewhere, I could dive for it.”

“Why you?” Jim stared at him. “If Curtis found treasure, I’m the one who should be looking for it.”

“Anyone can hire a diver.” Hal smirked. “The two of you don’t get to claim it just because you’re trained.”

“Never mind any of that.” Mary huffed. “We’re here to join

together, not argue. I'm sure there isn't really treasure. If there was, we would all know about it. Like Jim said, Curtis would have told him."

"Right." Jim stared into the fire. "He would have."

As the bonfire wound down, Mary stood up from her beach chair. "My knees are getting sore. I think I'm going to head in."

"I'll clean up." Suzie offered.

"Mom, I'll walk you up to the house." Ben stood up to join her.

"It's all right, I'm fine," Mary said.

"No, I'll go with you." Cathy looped an arm around her mother's waist. The two made their way towards the house.

Trish gathered some of the left-over s'more supplies. "I'll take these up to the kitchen."

"Thanks Trish." Suzie noticed Mary's cell phone left behind on her chair, but she didn't look directly at it. "I'll put out this fire. Would one of you bring up the chairs?"

"We can work together." Hal stretched his arms.

As Suzie put out the fire, the beach was plunged into darkness. It was a cloudy night without a lot of illumination. In the shadows she couldn't tell who folded up Mary's chair, but not one of them mentioned finding her phone. As they headed up the beach with the chairs, she checked the sand to be sure it hadn't been left behind. Without any sign of it, she could only guess that someone had taken the bait.

After putting away the chairs Suzie headed up the beach a short distance to the dive shack. Once inside she could see the camera pointed at the beach. It wouldn't take long before whoever took the phone figured out that the coordinates led directly to the shack. A few minutes later, Mary joined her in the shack. They were quiet as they waited to see who took the bait. Almost an hour slipped by.

"Maybe no one did." Mary frowned. "Does that mean it was Hal or Trish?"

"Maybe no one noticed your phone and it's still folded up in one of the chairs."

"Ugh, if so we're back to square one."

Just then, a figure came into view on the video feed. Suzie grabbed Mary's arm. Somehow the person had slipped past them and was right outside the dive shack. Mary flicked off the video monitor to prevent any light from shining. The door knob to the shack began to twist. Suzie held her breath as the figure stepped

inside. All they needed was to see his face. Once they saw it, they could go to Kirk with a genuine suspect. But the shack was dim, and although the figure was definitely male it was hard to detect any other characteristics. He began to shove furniture and equipment aside. He stomped on the floorboards. There was no question that he was looking for something. Mary and Suzie huddled further back in their hiding place.

"Suzie, what if he finds us?" Mary hissed.

"Sh!" Suzie tightened her grip on Mary's arm. She had planned that they would slip out the back before the murderer got inside, but he'd gotten inside so fast that there was no time to escape. He shoved aside the pile of boxes that they hid behind, and stared down into their frightened faces.

"Was this some kind of trap?" Jim glared at them. "Where's the treasure?"

"It was just a joke." Mary cleared her throat. "Something to lighten the mood."

"Some joke." He snarled and grabbed Suzie by the arm. When he pulled her to her feet, she had to swallow back a scream. The gun he had tucked into his waistband silenced her. "I know that Curtis found treasure. He stole it from me. It belonged to both of us. But he lied and said there wasn't any treasure there. Then he went back and got it, to keep it for himself. That treasure is rightfully mine."

"So you murdered him?" Suzie stared at him. "Why would you kill him? He was the only one who could tell you where the treasure was."

"Because he told me that it was in a secret underwater cave. Once I knew where it was, I killed him. He deserved it. He stole from me, he betrayed me, and he thought he could get away with it. But imagine my surprise when I found out that he really was nothing but a liar, and there was no cave!"

"Jim, calm down." Suzie studied him. "We can help you out of this."

"Oh, you're going to help me all right. Now, you're going to tell me exactly where the treasure is." His voice sent shivers down Mary's spine. She held her breath for a moment to keep from gasping. "Need some motivation?" He shoved Suzie hard into the wall. Suzie slumped to the floor, unconscious. "She's going to be your motivation. If you," he pointed at Mary, "don't take me to the treasure, she's not going to survive." He grabbed some rope and tied

Suzie up, then opened one of the cylinders on the floor beside her. “Those fumes are going to kill her in an hour. That’s how long you’ve got.” He turned back to Mary. “So what’s it going to be? Are you going to tell me where the treasure is and save both of you, or are you going to die right here with her?”

“I’ll show you. But we need a boat.”

“Luckily, I have a boat. I was going out diving again.” Jim pulled her out of the shack. Her eyes blurred with tears at the thought of Suzie alone in the shack. When she felt the heel of his hand push against the back of her shoulder she forced herself to take a step forward. “Where is it? Tell me, or you’re never going to see Suzie again.”

“You can’t do this. Jim, I know you’re a good man, deep down.”

“Am I?” He laughed. “The only thing I know I am about to be, is a rich man. Now, tell me where the treasure is. Time is running out for your friend.”

“Okay, but I can’t tell you. I have to take you there.”

“Why?” He narrowed his eyes.

“It’s not on any map, and it’s hidden.”

“Well, isn’t that convenient. Fine, let’s go then.” He grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her down the beach. Mary’s heart raced when she spotted a couple on a stroll along the beach. She opened her mouth to scream, but he squeezed her arm hard before she could. “One noise, one word, and Suzie is going to lose her best friend.”

“I won’t say anything.” Mary recalled the gun in his waistband and closed her eyes. She clenched her teeth despite the terror that rushed through her.

“Good. We’re going to the dock. Take your car.”

Mary did as he instructed and opened the door to the car that she shared with Suzie. Her hands trembled as she gripped the steering wheel. All she could think of was Suzie back in the shack, all alone. She didn’t have her phone, since that was part of the ploy, so she had no way to alert anyone to Suzie’s plight.

“How long does she have?”

“Never mind that. Just drive.”

Mary drove fast, but Jim patted her knee. “Slow down. I don’t want us getting pulled over. No tricks.”

“Sorry.” She bit into her bottom lip and parked at the dock. He led her down to the end of the dock to a small boat, and instructed

her to get on. She did as she was told and gave him the general direction to go. She didn't want to tell him too much, as she knew her usefulness, and in turn Suzie's, would disappear the moment he found the treasure. After some time motoring across the open water, Jim stared hard at her.

"Where are we going, Mary?"

"There." She pointed to the island and shivered. She could have lied and led him somewhere else, but she didn't want to risk Suzie's life. She only hoped that the time they spent getting to the island would be enough for something miraculous to happen. As he edged the boat close to the island she wondered if this would be the last place she would ever see. It was pretty, at least. She drank in the sight of the moon and the stars as they illuminated the water below. The sky had begun to clear.

"Let's go." He turned the boat off and dropped an inflatable boat down into the water. "You first." Mary struggled to get over the side of the boat, and landed awkwardly. Jim jumped in after her, and paddled them towards the shore. Mary considered trying to wrench a paddle from him, but she knew she wasn't strong enough to overcome him. When they reached the shore, Jim climbed out first. "Where?"

"I'll show you."

"No. Just tell me."

"I can't, it's too hard to describe. I have to show you."

"Fine. Let's go."

"Wait." She climbed out of the boat. "What's to stop you from leaving me here and never going back to save Suzie?"

"This." He held up her phone. "Once I have the treasure, I will give you this. You can call for help, I don't care, I'll be long gone. None of this would have been necessary if Rick had taken the fall like he was supposed to."

"What do you mean?"

"I planted his shoes in that shack so that the local police would think he was the killer. But they're not even smart enough to do that."

Her stomach churned. He'd taken Ben's shoes by mistake because they were in his room and the same size as Rick's. But what if he hadn't? She came to the awful realization that she would have believed Rick was a killer if it was his shoes that Kirk found in the shack.

“He was your friend, Jim. Why did you do this to him?”

“Friends don’t lie and cheat. The only good thing that ever happened in my life was finding that shipwreck. I thought Curtis was protecting me when he said I shouldn’t go down, that it was too dangerous. But the truth was, he wanted to take the treasure for himself. He lied about there being nothing there, and then stole it right out from under me. I deserved it just as much as he did. But instead of being my friend, he was a thief. He deserved what he got.”

“But I don’t understand. You never left your room. Did you have a partner?”

“There’s more than one way to leave a room you know. I am experienced at abseiling, remember? I used the ropes that Curtis had of mine to abseil down the outside of the building, I tampered with Curtis’ equipment, then I climbed back up. Really, Curtis killed himself. He should have checked his equipment before he went diving, but he was always making stupid mistakes like that. If he had checked it, he would still be alive. But he didn’t, and now he’s dead. Your friend is going to be the next to die if you don’t show me where that treasure is.”

“Over there.” She whispered as she pointed across the island. “Under the rocks.”

Together they walked towards them. Mary wanted to believe that he would give her the phone, but she doubted it. When they reached the rocks, his tone became nastier.

“Is this some kind of trick?” Jim stared at her. “You move them.”

“I don’t know if I can move them all.”

“You’d better make your best effort.” He gestured to the rocks.

“All right, all right, I’ll try.” She grabbed the rock on the top and heaved it aside. Maybe Paul would wonder where Suzie was, maybe Ben or Cathy would decide to go looking for her. Someone had to do something, because she had a very strong feeling that Jim was not going to let her go.

“Let’s go, move it.” Jim gave her a light shove from behind.

Mary pushed the last of the rocks aside, then stood back. Her heart lurched as she realized that the moment he saw the treasure, she would become nothing but a liability to him. As he walked up to the edge of the hole she glanced around in search of anything that she might be able to use as a weapon. She could try to run,

even with her bad knees, but the island was so small, and there was nowhere to hide.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 19

“I knew it.” Jim stared down into the hole. “I knew it!” He turned towards Mary with wide eyes and red cheeks. “You’re a liar!”

“What?” Mary took a step back and stumbled on one of the rocks as Jim advanced on her.

“Where is the treasure? I thought you cared about your friend, but I was wrong. Now if you don’t tell me where the treasure is I’m going to go back to that old house and reunite your son and daughter with their dear aunt. Do you understand me?”

“No wait, please. The treasure should be there. That’s where it was when we found it.” Mary made her way to the edge of the hole and looked inside. Nothing but a pit of sand greeted her. She crouched down and dug in the sand. The further she dug, the more her hands shook. If the treasure was gone, then she had no way of protecting Suzie, or her children. Nothing would stop Jim from going after them all. “Someone must have taken it.” She closed her eyes.

“Someone? Who could? I thought you said only Suzie and you knew where the treasure was? Or was that a lie, too?”

“No, it was the truth. I thought we were the only ones, but someone must have found out about it.”

“Or maybe Suzie isn’t the trustworthy friend that you thought she was.” He laughed. “Just like Curtis. He wanted to keep all of the money for himself. Suzie probably moved the treasure so that she would have it for herself. How does that feel?”

“She wouldn’t.” Mary shook her head.

“That’s what I thought, too. But look how that turned out. Honestly, I feel sorry for you. I know what it feels like to be betrayed by someone you considered to be a friend. But none of that matters right now. All that matters is me getting that treasure.

No matter how much sympathy I have for you, please understand, I will not hesitate to do whatever it takes to get it."

"Just let me talk to her. If you let me talk to her, I'm sure she'll tell me where the treasure is. If she knows that you're threatening me, or Ben, or Cathy, she'll do anything to keep us safe. Please, just let me talk to her."

"Fine. I will. But that's the last chance either of you are going to have." He grabbed her arm and pulled her back towards the boat.

Mary was certain that Suzie hadn't moved the treasure, but at the very least she would be able to see her friend again. As they headed back towards the boat, Mary heard something splash in the water not far from her. She glanced to the side, and spotted a small rock as it landed in the water. She looked up and saw a police boat, hidden by the shadows of one of the few trees. Instantly she knew what to do. She lunged away from Jim, and suddenly the entire island lit up with the flashing lights of the police boat. Jim was tackled to the ground by an officer while Kirk shouted at him to stay down.

"He has a gun!" Mary gasped. She watched as the officer wrestled the gun out of Jim's hands. She had no idea how Kirk found her, but tears of relief spilled down her cheeks. "Suzie! Someone has to help Suzie." She breathlessly explained Suzie's location. Kirk barked into his radio, then wrapped an arm around Mary.

"It's okay, Mary. We're going to take care of her. Let's get you off this island."

After a few minutes on the boat Kirk walked over to her.

"Suzie has been found. She's fine. There were no dangerous fumes, I think that Jim was trying to scare you. She was just knocked out."

"Oh, thank goodness." She pressed her hand against her chest. "But how did you find us? And where is the treasure?"

"I got notification during dinner that they managed to trace the last call that Curtis made the morning of his death and it was to a pawn broker so that heightened my suspicions that he might have had treasure. I also found out that R. Norris was not Rick it was a different diver so I didn't think that Rick was the murderer, but I wasn't sure. After Suzie mentioned the cave, and that Curtis might be looking for a hiding place, I thought about this island. When I spoke with Paul after dinner, he mentioned you and Suzie going out

on a boat with Shawn. I thought it was strange. So I decided to take a look at the island myself. I found and confiscated the treasure. I knew that the killer would come looking for the treasure eventually, so I kept a patrol on it. When they spotted you and Jim they alerted me. It's a good thing they did, because you could have been killed, Mary."

"I know." She sighed and wiped at her eyes. "It was a risk I had to take."

"I wish you had come to me first. Now that we have Curtis' killer, it's hard to be upset. I understand you were worried about Ben, but your life matters, too."

"Thanks Kirk." She smiled at him as the boat pulled up to the docks. Jim was led off in handcuffs. The moment Mary stepped off the boat Suzie ran towards her. She threw her arms around her friend.

"Oh, Mary I'm so sorry. I never should have let you be in such danger."

"We had our reasons, Suzie." She filled her in on what Jim told her about Curtis taking the treasure for himself, and how he was able to escape from his room without being seen.

"It's hard to believe we were under the same roof as a murderer all this time."

"But all that matters is that we're all safe now." She saw her son as he approached from the parking lot. "Almost all of us. Kirk, do you have a minute to talk with me and Ben? He has a difficult matter he's dealing with."

"Sure." He nodded. "Anything that I can do to help, I'm here."

"Thanks." She hugged Ben. "I want you to come with me and speak to Kirk so we can sort out your little problem."

"I don't know, Mom. Dad gave me more money so I have some more time."

"No, we need to solve this once and for all so you can put it behind you. Trust me."

"Okay." Ben nodded. Mary put her arm around him and led him off to speak with Kirk.

Suzie rubbed her head where she'd collided with the wall. Paul walked up to her in the midst of all of the flashing lights.

"What's going on here?"

Suzie filled him in on the events, the arrest, and being left in the shack. "I came to when Ben found me. Kirk called him because he

knew he would be the closest. Poor Mary must have been beside herself."

"I'm so glad that you're safe." He looked into her eyes. "Shortly after I docked I heard all of the sirens, it scared me. I knew something was up."

"I'm sorry, in all of the chaos I should have called you, but I wanted to make sure Mary was safe, it was all I was thinking about."

"I understand."

"What do you think they'll do with the treasure?"

"I don't know. Once they decide who it belongs to, they'll go from there."

"I'm just so glad this is over." Suzie hugged him. "Now, finally Curtis can have some peace."

"He was lucky to have you as a friend, Suzie." He kissed the top of her head.

"Ouch!"

"Oops, sorry." He smiled and kissed her cheek instead. "Next time, keep me in the loop, hmm?"

"Yes, I will, Paul. I just wanted to keep you safe, so I thought the less you knew the better."

"I'd like to be able to do the same for you once in a while. I'm not sure how you think you can keep me safe, when you're always putting my heart at such risk."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you carry my heart with you, Suzie, whether you know that or not. When you're in danger, it's in danger."

"That's sweet." Suzie smiled at him. He had such a rugged exterior with his broad shoulders, curly hair, big bushy eyebrows and weathered skin that he always surprised her with his sensitivity.

"It's the truth. So the next time you think you're protecting me, please try to remember, whenever you take a risk with yourself, you're taking a risk with my heart, too."

"I'll remember." She gazed into his eyes. "And I promise not to cheat on you anymore."

"Good, because Shawn was going to pay for that."

"Stop!" She laughed. He hugged her again. Over his shoulder she saw Hal and Trish huddled close in the parking lot. All of the commotion had woken up just about the entire town of Garber. The

two clung to each other. Suzie realized that their relationship might not be perfect, but it was still strong. Hal had a checkered past, and a bit of a temper. Trish had a wandering eye, and a desire for a little drama. But they loved each other, and in the end, stuck together through a very difficult time. Just as Mary and Ben walked away from Kirk, Cathy and Rick walked up to them. Mary offered her hand to Rick.

"I'm sorry for doubting you, Rick."

"I'm sorry for giving you reason to." He held her gaze. "One of these days, we should talk. I'll answer whatever questions you have. But the most important thing you can know, is that I would never do anything to harm your daughter, or your family."

"I believe you, Rick." Mary looked over at Cathy. "I trust your judgment, Cathy, I'm sorry that I questioned it."

"Maybe if Jim had someone to protect him, and look out for him, the way you do me, none of this would have ever happened. I know everything you do, you do out of love, Mom. I'm sorry if I lost sight of that."

"What do you say we give this vacation another try?" Suzie smiled as she walked up to them. "Starting tomorrow morning, Mary is officially off for the week."

"Suzie, you can't handle everything alone."

"Oh, I won't have to, right Paul?" She grinned at him.

"Huh? Oh sure, right." Paul nodded.

"Just don't let him do the laundry." Mary laughed.

"Hey!" Paul chuckled. "Actually, that's probably for the best."

As they walked back towards Dune House, Suzie looked over her shoulder at the open water. She couldn't see the island, but she imagined that Curtis was there, putting the last rock back into place. He'd loved adventure, and though his life was short, he'd lived it fully. Even though his dishonesty had led to his death, she hoped that justice being served, would give him some peace.

The End

OceanofPDF.com

CELEBRITIES AND CHAOS

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERY SERIES BOOK 10

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 1

Mary tugged open the door of the dryer and caught the warm sheets that spilled out. It seemed to her that she couldn't get the laundry done fast enough. Dune House was filled to the brim, and keeping up with the housekeeping was a little overwhelming, but she loved every minute of it.

"Here, let me help you with that." Suzie stepped into the laundry room and took half of the sheets. "Crazy, isn't it?"

"Yes." Mary laughed as she followed Suzie out of the laundry room and into the hallway. "Fun, but crazy."

"Are you holding up okay?" Suzie paused in front of one of the guest rooms. "If you need a break, just let me know."

"I'm fine, Suzie, I promise." She winked at her friend then disappeared into one of the rooms. As she changed the sheets she couldn't help but glance around the room. It was filled with assorted memorabilia, both from the television show that was currently being filmed in Garber, and other hit shows that the guest had taken part in. Ty Hobbs was a popular reality TV actor and presenter, and although Mary hadn't seen many of his shows, she knew that he was quite well-known. It was easy to be impressed by him, as he was handsome, but also quite gregarious. He'd had everyone laughing over dinner the night before. She smoothed down the sheets and as her hand ran underneath one of the pillows, it bumped into something hard and smooth. She drew her hand back and stared at the pillow. She suspected what it was, but didn't know what to do.

"Excuse me, I didn't realize you were in here." Ty paused in the doorway.

"Sorry, yes, just putting on fresh sheets." She glanced over at him with a nervous smile.

“Thanks.” He stepped inside the room and looked over at the bed. “The pre-breakfast meeting finished early, I can take it from here.”

“Sure.” Her hands fluttered for a moment, she had no idea what to do with them, however as he walked past her towards the bed, she clasped them behind her back and summoned up strength. “Ty, we don’t allow weapons in Dune House.”

“Weapons?” He looked over his shoulder at her. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I was putting on the sheet, and I had to go under your pillow and…”

“This?” He laughed as he picked up the pillow and revealed a metal cylinder, that to her had felt like the barrel of a gun. “It’s my toothbrush. I hide it here because the members of my crew like to play pranks on me. You would not believe the places I’ve found it.” He rolled his eyes. “They all think it’s funny, but I got tired of replacing it.”

“I see, I’m so sorry.” She flushed as she realized she’d just wrongly accused a celebrity.

“It’s quite all right, just do me a favor and keep my secret, hmm?” He winked at her then hid the toothbrush under the pillow again.

“Yes, of course I will.” She stepped back out of the room and tried to forget the embarrassing moment. However, the more she tried not to think about it, the hotter her cheeks became. Luckily, she didn’t have time to dwell on it as there were other sheets that needed to be changed. She hurried into the next room, and went down the line until she ran out of sheets. There she ran into Suzie again.

“All done.” Suzie breathed a sigh of relief. “Now, we just have to get breakfast on the table.”

“And we’d better hurry.” Mary glanced at her watch. “They have to be on set by ten.”

As they reached the bottom of the stairs that led into the kitchen, six people filed in through the front door. They were additional staff and crew. Since all the rooms at Dune House were full they had been set up at the local motel, but were still invited to partake in the meals at Dune House. Suzie grabbed some eggs from the fridge while Mary greeted the guests and inquired what they would like to drink. By the time breakfast was on the table, Suzie

was exhausted, and ready to eat. They all squeezed around the long wooden table in the dining room. The chatter was so loud that Mary could only smile at Suzie from across the table, there was no chance to actually converse. When a couple came in the door, late to breakfast, Mary jumped up.

"Hi Cynthia, Marcus, please come and join us."

"Sorry we're late." Cynthia shot a look of displeasure towards her husband, then settled at the table.

"Let me get your breakfast." Mary stepped into the kitchen. Cynthia was the only member of the crew that ate a vegan diet, so she kept her breakfast separate from the rest. When she returned with a fresh baked muffin, a bowl of fruit, and her favorite sparkling water, Cynthia was caught up in a conversation with Ty.

"I just think if we really push it today we could wrap up a day or two early. But if you keep letting everyone slide, then we're going to run behind."

"I get that, but it's not up to me, you know that. The director has the final say on whether a scene is complete, and if he wants to do retakes, we need to do retakes." He paused a moment and pushed his egg around on his plate. "Maybe, if you and I rehearsed a few of the scenes again, I'd be able to nail it better."

"You have plenty of people you can rehearse with." Marcus crossed his arms as he studied Ty. "She already works long hours."

"It's not work, Marcus, it's helping out Ty, and besides, we want to be finished on time, right?" She shot a smile in her husband's direction. "If this is the way we get to that, then why complain?"

"Right." He narrowed his eyes, but didn't say another word. He looked down at his plate and left his food untouched.

"Here you go, Cynthia." Mary set the breakfast down in front of her.

"What is this?" She looked at the muffin, then picked up her fork and poked it.

"It's a cinnamon raisin swirl muffin. I thought you might like it." Mary smiled. "I baked it this morning."

"And did you use egg in this muffin, or milk?" She raised an eyebrow.

"No, of course not."

"And I guess you completely overlooked the fact that I am gluten free?" She crossed her arms.

"What?" Mary blinked, her heart began to pound. "I don't recall

that being on the list of your meal requirements."

"I'm sure it was there, since I've been gluten free for over a year. Is it safe to assume that you used flour in this muffin?" She shoved her plate away.

"Well yes, but I didn't know." Mary frowned. "I can get something different for you. Let me take that away." She reached for the muffin.

"No!" Cynthia slapped it out of her hand. "The whole plate of food is ruined, anything might have been contaminated. I don't understand how this place got such great reviews for good customer service when you could have made me ill with the breakfast you tried to serve me. Take it away I said!"

Mary stared crestfallen at the muffin on the floor. She'd taken extra time to bake it just for Cynthia, and the scent of it had nearly driven her crazy with hunger. Now, no one would be able to eat it.

"Excuse me, that's quite enough." Suzie started to stand up.

"No, it's all right, Suzie, it's all right." Mary bent down to pick up the muffin and did her best to ignore the pain in her knees and back. The aches just reminded her that she had about thirty years on the woman who bossed her around. Maybe it was customary for Hollywood types to be so ruthless, but she certainly wasn't used to it. She carried the breakfast back into the kitchen and looked back at the list that Cynthia gave her. Sure enough, in tiny print all the way at the bottom were the words 'gluten free'. She closed her eyes and shook her head. In her younger days, she doubted that she would have missed that. But as it was, she often had a difficult time reading fine print. It made her feel awful that she really had made a mistake, and that Cynthia could have possibly fallen ill due to it. However, she was also certain that the woman could have been more gracious about it. She prepared a new bowl of fruit, and paired it with the cereal that Cynthia deemed acceptable on her list. Then she added the almond milk that she requested. As she carried it back to the table, the conversation had died down. Some of the guests had already left, while others were just finishing up. She placed the bowl down in front of Cynthia.

"Here you are, I'm so very sorry about the mistake."

"It's too late now!" She huffed as she stood up from the table. "It's almost ten o'clock, I can't eat this now. What is wrong with you?" She turned and stalked out of the dining room.

"I'm sorry, she's under a lot of stress." Marcus frowned as he

watched her go. “She’s just a little wound up.”

“No, it was my mistake, it’s all right.” Mary cleared her throat and did her best to hold back tears. She was humiliated by the woman’s behavior, and also felt responsible for the terrible mistake. “I’ll make sure her lunch is perfect.”

“Trust me, with Cynthia, nothing is ever perfect.” He rolled his eyes, then followed after his wife. The show’s producer, Drake, wiped his mouth and stood up.

“I have to get going. Thanks for the breakfast, ladies.”

Ty stood up as well and winked at Mary. “Chin up, darling, she’s not actually gluten intolerant she just wants to lose ten pounds.”

Mary’s cheeks flushed at his words, with anger. Was she really throwing a tantrum over a diet? It made her infuriated to think so. Ty was already out the door before she could find the words to express what she felt.

“What a piece of work, huh?” Suzie rolled her eyes as she began to clear the table.

“Yes, quite.” Mary stared at the door. “One of these days someone is going to knock her down a peg, then we’ll see how she handles it.”

“No, we won’t.” Suzie picked up another plate. “Because you and I won’t ever have to see that woman again by the end of this week. Keep that in mind.”

“Good reminder.” Mary nodded.

Twenty minutes later, the house was empty of guests, and the kitchen was quiet but for the sound of the faucet filling the dishpan. Mary sank her hands deep into the soapy water and smiled to herself as the warmth eased some pain in her fingers and wrists. She dreaded mentioning her aches and pains to the doctor, but she knew that one day soon she would need to.

“Let me help with that.” Suzie rested her back against the counter beside her.

“No, it’s fine, I enjoy doing the dishes.” Mary shrugged as she began to wash a plate.

“You aren’t overwhelmed by all of this?” Suzie frowned as she glanced over the quiet kitchen. “Sometimes I wonder if I made a mistake by agreeing to host all of these people.”

“No way, you didn’t make any mistake.” She looked up at her with a wide grin. “I’m loving this. Having a house full of people, and taking care of them, it just feels right.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Suzie kicked off one shoe and reached down to rub her heel. “All the running back and forth is making muscles ache that I didn’t even know I had.”

“It sounds like you need a walk on the beach.” Mary nudged her with her elbow. “Go on, I’ve got this. Go clear your head.”

“Are you sure?” Suzie met her eyes. “I don’t want to leave all of the work to you.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get you back later when the floors need to be mopped.”

“Ugh.” Suzie laughed. “Deal.” As she stepped out through the back door, she noticed that there were many boxes and crates piled up near the shed. She knew that the crew had stored some things there, but didn’t realize how much. It amazed her how much went into a production. She’d always watched television shows, but she’d never really thought about the amount of work it took to produce them. Even the crew was much larger than she expected. As she began to shift the boxes into the shed, she heard a voice from the side deck of the house. It wasn’t hard to hear it, as it sounded as if the person was quite angry.

“I don’t care who invited her. I am supposed to be warned if she is going to be part of the crew, so why wasn’t I contacted? That is what I want to know.” He paused as if he was waiting for a reply, then raised his voice even more. “That is your job. You are supposed to know these things. No, I don’t want off of the crew, are you kidding me? This is the best chance I have at being a presenter again someday. But you’d better believe that if she says one word to me, we’re going to have trouble.”

Suzie cringed as she heard those words. She didn’t know who the person on the phone was, or who he was angry at, but she guessed that they might both be guests at Dune House. That much

anger trapped in one space was not going to end well. She made a mental note to look into it, maybe there was something she could do to ease the tension. As she set the last box in the shed, she didn't hear the man's voice anymore. She guessed that the conversation was over, and hoped that he would calm down. She closed up the shed then headed down to the beach. It was a beautiful morning, and although one part of the beach was roped off for filming, the view was still glorious and the environment serene.

The day she'd received a call from the producer, Drake, requesting to rent out all of the rooms in Dune House, she'd thought it was a joke. Now and then they received wealthy guests, and sometimes well-known ones, but she'd never considered hosting an entire television crew, let alone Ty Boggs. She'd almost hung up, when he insisted that since they received a permit from the town of Garber to film their pilot for a new TV show on a nearby segment of the beach, they thought Dune House would be the ideal location. As the show was on a limited budget, he had requested that Suzie and Mary cater for all of the crew and actors as it was cheaper than getting a catering service.

Suzie wasn't sure if they could handle the influx of guests and catering for so many people, but decided it was time to find out. Now that they were in the middle of it, she still wondered if it might have been too much, not just for them, but the entire town. She'd heard complaints from some of the local businesses that the stars and crew were quite demanding, and expected to be catered to in ways that the small town was not familiar with. However, with only days left in filming, and the amount of revenue it generated for the town, she hoped that it would turn out to be a positive thing. The further she walked along the beach, the more relaxed she became. Though, there was a time in her life when she craved being in the middle of all of the action, now she found solace in the small town, and the beautiful beach that bordered it. When her cell phone rang, she jumped at the sound, then smiled at the sight of Paul's name.

"Hi honey, are you home?"

"Yes, just pulled in a little while ago. I have some things to do on the boat, then I'll be free. I'm guessing that you won't be though." He chuckled. "Can you use an extra set of hands?"

"You just want to try to get some autographs, don't you?"

"Not a chance. Unless you're offering yours."

“You can always have mine.” She smiled and savored the sound of his voice. Paul was a professional fisherman. He had just returned from a long trip and she was looking forward to spending some time with him. “Come on by whenever you’re free. We’ll be there.”

“Okay love, until then.” He hung up the phone.

She tucked the phone back into her pocket and took a deep breath of the salt-filled air. Maybe things were a little chaotic, but what could possibly disrupt paradise?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 2

When Mary glanced at the clock, she realized it was close to lunch time. She already had most of the food prepared for the day. When Suzie returned from her walk, they'd carted some of it down to the catering tables near the set. Now that she'd gone off to pick up some things from town, Mary decided to take the last of the items down herself, along with the perfect lunch she'd prepared for Cynthia. She just hoped it would make up for the horrible breakfast.

Once she had everything piled into bags, she started across the sand. As Mary neared the ropes along the beach, she felt a bit of a rush carry through her. She'd never been one to idolize celebrities, but somehow being part of the process, even if it was just providing lunch, seemed exhilarating. She watched as the camera crew rolled along the sand and filmed the conversation between two actors. It was easy to see the strain in their muscles, and just how much precision it took to make sure that the camera was angled just right. However, as the scene came to a close, the director stood up from his chair and threw down his clipboard.

"Garbage!" The shriek that carried across the otherwise calm beach drew the attention of everyone within earshot. "I told you we need seriousness in this scene! Was that a giggle? Was it Ryan?" He snatched up his clipboard and waved it through the air. "How am I supposed to film this if you can't give me what I'm asking for?"

"Preston, I think he's just a little nervous, maybe if we do a few more dry runs?" Cynthia offered in a soft tone from a few feet away.

"Excuse me?" He snapped around to look at her. "Was anyone talking to you?"

"I'm sorry, I just think that if you take it easy, Ryan will respond better to your direction." She placed her hands on her hips.

“Clearly, the intimidation tactics aren’t working. Look at him.” She pointed to the young man, who appeared to tremble where he stood. “You can’t replace him now, so you’re going to have to figure it out, or we’re all just wasting our time here, Preston, and you know it.”

“You don’t ever tell me what to do.” He stomped over to her and glared straight into her eyes. “You are nothing, do you hear me? A mere consultant. You baby these people too much, that’s the problem. You’re so soft on them that they think their opinion matters. It doesn’t. They are cattle!” He shouted his last words.

“Uh, maybe we should take a break. I’m sensing we have some hangry people around here.” Ty looked straight at Mary. “You’ve arrived just in time.”

“Oh sure, take a break, never mind that time is money. Never mind that we haven’t gotten past this one scene all morning. Let’s all just stuff our faces.” Preston threw his clipboard down again, then turned and walked away. Mary nervously walked over to the refreshment table and made sure that everything was ready. It wasn’t long before it was almost wiped clean. She noticed that Cynthia hung back. She appeared to be speaking with Ryan, though it didn’t seem as if her efforts were reassuring to him. Since Mary brought her a special vegan meal she decided to walk it over to her while it was still fresh. As she approached she caught the tail end of their conversation.

“I got you this job, that doesn’t mean that you can act like this. I told you, Preston is hard to work for. I warned you. So straighten up or I will find a way to replace you!” She turned to storm away, but nearly walked into Mary instead. “What?” She shouted.

“I’m sorry, I just thought you might like your lunch before it gets cold.” Mary took a step back, startled by the force of the woman’s voice.

“Fine.” She snatched the box from her hands. “This better be edible.”

“I’m sure you will like it, it includes a warm quinoa salad. I double-checked your list, and made sure to use only the ingredients on it. I do hope this will help to make up for breakfast.” Mary offered her the warmest smile that she could muster.

“I doubt it.” Cynthia rolled her eyes and stalked away.

“Nice.” Mary shook her head and turned to walk back towards the refreshment table, when she heard her name spoken from just

behind her. She turned to see a young man. She struggled to recall his name, but couldn't place it. "Yes?"

"I couldn't help but overhear. I'm Shawn." He offered her his hand.

"Shawn, that's it. Sorry, I just couldn't think of it." Mary smiled and shook his hand. "Did you have enough to eat?"

"More than enough. I've been grazing from that table. Thanks for all of the effort you put in. And, I'm sorry she treated you that way." He frowned. "She can be so difficult to work with. Trust me, I know from experience. I wish she wasn't on this production at all. But Ty insisted."

"I'm sure she's just under a lot of pressure." Mary waved her hand. "I guess it's not unusual for people in show business to be a little demanding."

"Maybe a little, but she takes it to a whole new level." He sighed and glanced back at the roped off area. "I have to get back. Just try not to let her get to you."

"Thanks for the advice." She met his eyes with a small smile.

"If you have any trouble at all, just ask for me, all right?" He patted her shoulder. "You've done a great job for all of us, really, I mean that." He turned and headed back towards the production area.

Mary watched him for a moment longer, then walked back up the beach towards Dune House.

As humiliated as Mary was by Cynthia's tantrum, she was also left questioning herself. Could she do a better job? She certainly didn't want something she did wrong to cause a bad review of Dune House that might be read by hundreds of people. She vowed that she would make an effort to behave more professionally and to stay away from everyone during production. When she reached Dune

House she decided to check on the towel supply in the bathrooms before she started to prepare dinner. She was on the last bathroom when she heard the front door open, followed by some voices.

"Really, Marcus I'll be fine. Just go back to work. I need to lay down, that's all."

"I can stay with you if you want."

"No! So you can get fired from another production? I swear sometimes it seems like I'm the only one that cares about all of the bills we need to pay. If I thought I was going to be sick before, now I really feel sick. Get out!"

Mary jumped as she heard heavy steps on the stairs. She stepped out of the bathroom as Cynthia reached the hallway.

"Cynthia, excuse me." She stepped to the side. Cynthia barely looked at her as she stormed towards Drake's room.

"Drake said I could rest here, I'm not feeling well." She slammed the door shut without ever looking at Mary.

Mary shook her head and continued down the stairs. Whatever was eating Cynthia, she guessed, was better left alone. To calm her nerves and ensure some quiet for Cynthia, she decided to step outside and straighten up the porch. She lost herself in thought as she turned and brushed off each cushion, then wiped down the arms of each of the chairs. She spent some time sweeping off the porch until she realized she was just pushing the same few grains of sand back and forth. She set the broom against the house and took a deep breath as she looked out over the water. She knew she had to find a way to let go of everything she was starting to bottle up. She didn't want to carry resentment towards Cynthia, but she also knew she wasn't the type of person she would like to spend a lot of time around. When she heard Suzie's car pull into the parking lot, she was relieved. She always had a way of making things clear to Mary, no matter how complicated they seemed.

"Mary, how is your afternoon going?" Suzie smiled as she mounted the porch and walked towards her friend.

"Honestly, I'm a little flustered. I had a run-in with Cynthia at lunch time." She frowned as she met Suzie's eyes. "I hope it doesn't cause any problems."

"What kind of run-in?" Suzie pulled out one of the chairs at the table and sat down.

"She wasn't happy about me interrupting her. I just wanted to give her the lunch I made her, since she wasn't happy about the

breakfast I made." She sighed and shook her head. "She was already wound up about something, and I should have known better. Anyway, now she's upstairs in Drake's room resting because she's feeling sick. I guess maybe that was why she was so short with me."

"Ah, that's possible. We should check in with her later to see if she needs to see the doctor. I'm sure he'd be willing to come out for a visit." Suzie glanced at her watch, then back at Mary. "We should get dinner going as we're going to have a hungry crew arriving soon."

"Yes, you're right." Mary straightened out the extra chairs along the wall. She reached for the doorknob, but before she could turn it, a loud scream rattled the glass. Her heart dropped at the sound, as it wasn't just any scream, but a deep primal scream that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

"What is it?" Suzie pushed past her and pulled the door open. "Drake? What is it?" She froze just inside the door as she caught sight of Drake crouched down on the floor near the stairs.

"She's dead!" He rocked back on his heels and moaned. "She's dead!"

"Who's dead? What are you talking about?" Suzie's voice faded as she stepped through the kitchen and into the dining room. There, crumpled at the bottom of the stairs, was Cynthia. "Call an ambulance, Mary! Now!" She rushed forward and shooed Drake out of the way to check Cynthia's pulse.

"No, she's gone." Drake wiped at his eyes, but it didn't stop the flow of tears. "Nothing can be done."

Ty came through the door and ran straight towards Cynthia when he saw her body. "What's happened?" He sunk to his knees beside Cynthia.

"Suzie, is she breathing?" Mary kept her phone pressed against her ear.

"No." Suzie closed her eyes. "It's too late."

"What?" Mary's eyes widened.

"She's dead, Mary!" Suzie looked up at her with wide tear-filled eyes.

The phone dropped out of Mary's hand. As it clattered to the floor she could hear the operator calling out to her for information. But what could she say? She didn't want to tell her that she'd been out on the porch the entire time, while Cynthia drew her last breaths. In the distance she could hear sirens. But she knew that the

arrival of the police, and an ambulance, would do nothing to change the reality before her. Cynthia was dead, the same woman she'd just been frustrated with, the same woman that had been so dissatisfied with Mary's service. An immeasurable amount of guilt carried through her as scenarios of how she might have been able to save the woman played through her mind.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 3

The front door burst open and Jason, followed by two paramedics, rushed inside. Suzie stepped away from Drake and Ty as Jason gazed down at the body on the floor.

“What’s happened here?” Jason looked straight at Suzie, while the paramedics surged past him to check Cynthia’s pulse.

“I’m not sure. Maybe she fell down the stairs?” Suzie glanced up at the stairs. “They aren’t very steep. Maybe she slipped?” She looked back down at Cynthia.

The paramedics confirmed that there was no sign of life. Jason spoke into his radio to summon backup.

“We’re going to have to investigate this so we can determine what caused her death.” He looked from Suzie to Mary. “We’re going to have to search the property.”

“Anything.” Suzie nodded. “Anything that’s needed to figure out what happened here.”

“Oh, poor Cynthia.” Mary cupped her hand over her mouth and tried not to burst into tears.

“Who was the last one to see her?” Jason spun in a slow circle as he looked between the four faces.

“Drake is the one who found her.” Suzie placed her hand on his shoulder. “We came in when we heard him scream.”

“But I found her like this.” Drake wiped at his eyes. “I just wanted to check on her between takes. She said she was feeling ill and was going to rest on the porch. I told her to go ahead and use my room. I can only think whatever was making her sick, caused her to pass out, or maybe fall down the stairs.”

“I was coming to check on her as well.” Ty struggled to hold back tears. “Maybe if I’d come sooner.”

“I guess, I was the last one to see her.” Mary’s voice wavered as

that realization dawned on her. “I was replenishing the towels in the bathroom upstairs when she came in. I heard her arguing with her husband, and then he left. When she walked past me, she said that Drake had offered his room to rest in.”

“That was it, nothing else?” Jason stared into her eyes. “This is the most crucial time, Mary, if someone did harm her, your memory will be the freshest right now. Did anyone else come into Dune House after she arrived?”

“I honestly don’t know. I went outside, and I stayed outside, until Drake found her.” Mary clenched her hands into fists at her sides. The very thought of Cynthia at the bottom of the stairs while she wiped down deck chairs and swept off the porch made her feel terrible. Why hadn’t she just gone in to check on her? Usually, her nurturing nature would have demanded it.

“You didn’t hear anything suspicious? She didn’t cry out when she fell down the stairs?” Jason made a note in his notebook as more police officers arrived.

“No, I didn’t hear anything.” Mary closed her eyes as a wave of guilt washed over her. “How could I not hear anything?”

“It’s all right, Mary.” Suzie hugged her, and looked over at Jason. “That’s enough, she’s told you everything that she knows. This is a big shock.”

“I know it is.” Jason turned his attention to Drake. “You said she was feeling ill?”

“Yes, right after we started filming again, after we stopped for lunch. She said she was dizzy and sick to her stomach. She thought maybe the sun had gotten to her. So I sent her back here to rest.”

“She has a room here?” Jason glanced between the four.

“No.” Mary frowned. “She was staying at the motel.”

“I didn’t want her to drive or walk all that way when she was feeling sick. That’s why I suggested she use my room here.” Drake looked away as officers began to assess the area around Cynthia’s body. “I should have walked with her.”

“Did anyone go with her?” Jason looked over at Mary. “You said you heard her arguing with her husband?”

“Yes. They came in the door. I didn’t see them, but I could hear them, because they were a bit loud. He said something about staying with her, she refused and told him to go back to work or he’d be fired. I’m sorry, I don’t remember exactly. But that was the general idea.” She shivered and stepped aside as another officer

brushed past her and began to take photographs.

"Did you actually see her husband leave?" Jason looked towards the door, then back to her.

"No. I heard the door shut though."

"Are you certain?" He held her gaze.

"I..." She frowned. "I don't know. I thought I did. I'm sorry, Jason."

"It's okay." He patted her shoulder. "Just try to relax. I know that it's difficult, but anything you can tell me will be useful."

"There's nothing else to tell."

"Maybe we should step outside." Suzie bit into her bottom lip. "We'll need to inform the other guests."

"Not just yet." Jason nodded his head to Summer as she entered through the front door. "Summer's here to try to determine the cause of death. Once she does then we can decide on our next steps."

Suzie watched as Summer walked over to Cynthia's body. She was certain that it had to be an accident. What else could it be? She'd ended up at the bottom of the stairs, and was in the house all alone, so there was no other explanation that she could think of. When she put her hand on Mary's shoulder, she could feel how much her friend's body trembled.

"It's all right, Mary, all of this will be over soon. What a terrible thing to happen." She took a deep breath and looked into Mary's eyes. "No matter what, you couldn't have done anything to prevent this. I know that's what you're thinking."

"Oh Suzie, I just can't believe I was right outside." She shuddered and turned into her friend's embrace. "I should have checked on her, or made her some tea, or some soup."

"Sh. Don't torture yourself."

"Jason." Summer looked over at him with a grim frown. "Can I speak to you, please?"

"Sure." He walked towards her. Suzie started to follow after, but Summer shook her head.

Suzie froze. The look in Summer's eyes left her with an empty feeling.

"Suzie, what is it?" Mary looked past her at Summer. She and Jason leaned their heads close together and spoke in quiet tones. Jason looked up, then over at Suzie and Mary. He paused, then pulled out his radio and said something into it. With deliberate

steps he walked back over to them.

"I'm sorry to tell you, but this death has been ruled a homicide."

"A homicide?" Mary gasped. "But how? Does Summer think someone pushed her down the stairs?"

"Actually, there is no indication that she fell down the stairs. She may have collapsed at the bottom. However, there are signs that she was poisoned."

"Poisoned?" Suzie's eyes widened. "By what?"

"Most likely something she ingested, though there will have to be more testing to determine exactly what and how. For now, the entire house is going to have to be roped off and scoured for the source of the poison."

"But, where will all of the guests go? How long will it take?" Suzie's mind raced as she tried to put together all of the information that Jason gave her.

"It may take up to a few days. Everything will need to be processed. All of the guests, and the two of you will have to be interviewed. Do you know if she ate anything recently? Anything from the kitchen?" He looked over at the kitchen, then back to them.

"From our kitchen?" Suzie gazed at him with wide eyes. "There couldn't be anything in our kitchen that would have poisoned her. Mary and I do all of the cooking and all of the grocery shopping."

"Oh no." Mary's cheeks flushed. She looked down at her hands, which were clasped tight in front of her.

"What is it, Mary?" Jason peered at her. "Do you have something to tell me?"

"It's just." She took a deep breath, then released it slowly. "I took her lunch. Out on the beach. I'm not sure if she ate it or not, but I took it to her."

"What was in it?" Jason began jotting down notes on his notepad.

"Wait just a minute." Suzie placed her hand on Mary's still clasped hands. "Nothing Mary made could have been poisoned. Jason, I know you have to do your job, but…"

"You're absolutely right, I have to do my job, and as far as I know Mary was the last one to give her food, and the last one to see her alive, so I will be asking her questions." Jason's brow furrowed as he looked at Suzie. "A woman is dead, I can't take any chances here, or offer any favors."

“Of course you can’t, Jason,” Mary mumbled. “I wouldn’t expect you to. I’ll give you the recipe I used, it lists all of the ingredients. But of course, as far as I know there was nothing unusual in it.” She walked into the kitchen, her mind a fog as she sorted through her recipe cards. Was it possible? Did something poisonous slip into the food she’d prepared? She couldn’t imagine how. She kept a clean kitchen, and rarely left food unattended. What could possibly have gotten into the food that would kill a person? “Could it have been a food allergy, Jason?” She handed him the recipe card.

“No. I don’t think so. Summer would be able to tell the difference. Thanks for this. Listen, I know this is going to be hard on both of you, but trust me, it will be much better in the long run if I conduct a thorough and air tight investigation, understand?”

“Yes.” Suzie frowned as she crossed her arms. “But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Do you two have somewhere to stay?” He studied them.

“I guess we’ll go to the motel. There should be enough room there for the rest of the guests, too. I’ll just grab a few things.” Suzie started in the direction of the hallway.

“No, I’m sorry.” Jason winced as he put his hand on her arm. “I can’t allow you to remove anything from the property. Not until everything has been processed.”

“Not even our clothes? Our toothbrushes?” Mary stared at him.

“No, nothing. Once everything has been processed you can retrieve it. It’s the only way we can be certain that there is nothing in the home that could have caused Cynthia’s death.”

“Cynthia?”

Suzie looked up at the sound of another voice. Marcus stood in the doorway.

“Marcus.” She started towards him.

“Cynthia!” He ran forward and shoved Ty out of the way as he stood up to console him. “What did you do to her?”

“Me?” Ty stammered and took a few steps back. “I didn’t do anything. She was like this when I got here. Drake found her like this. I’m sorry, Marcus.”

“No! This can’t be happening!” Marcus covered his face with his hands and moaned. “We were going to work things out, we were. What happened?” He dropped his hands and looked straight at Suzie. “What happened to my wife?”

“Sir, I’d like to speak with you.” Jason drew him off to the side.

“I’m going to call the motel and make arrangements for everyone. We’re going to have some very unhappy people on our hands.” Suzie stepped out onto the porch as she dialed the number of the motel. She could see that there were more members of the crew headed in the direction of the house. How would they react to the news of Cynthia’s death? She guessed that they wouldn’t be pleased to find out that they wouldn’t be able to take any of their belongings with them to the motel. Once the arrangements were made she faced the daunting task of informing the guests that gathered on the porch.

“The situation we are faced with is a tragic one. I know that many of you will be grieving, and I am so sorry for your loss. While the police are investigating Cynthia’s death, we will need to move to the motel. Once the bed and breakfast is released from the investigation you will be able to collect your things and if you choose to stay, you can of course.”

“Wait, are you saying we can’t get anything from the house?” Shawn stepped forward, his eyes wide.

“I’m afraid not, not just yet. But I can assure you that the moment the contents of the bed and breakfast are released, we will be informed first. Mary and I will be moving to the motel as well, and if there’s anything we can do for any of you while we are there, please feel free to contact us.”

“This is terrible.” Shawn frowned.

“Has anyone told Preston?” Ty looked around the group of people. “Has anyone called him?”

“I don’t think so.” Shawn shook his head. “He’s going to be furious. I doubt that he’ll postpone the shoots.”

“I’ll talk to him.” Ty crossed his arms.

“Everyone, listen once more please.” Jason stepped out onto the deck and looked around at the crowd. “We are going to need to question you, it shouldn’t take long, but I do need you to be available for questioning and stay in Garber until otherwise advised. I do hope that you will cooperate with the investigation, so that we can get justice for Cynthia’s murder.”

Among grumbles, there were a few nods of agreement. Suzie did not envy Jason’s task of weeding through all of their last moments with Cynthia, but she hoped he would find something out quickly.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 4

After Jason cleared the guests to leave, Suzie and Mary headed over to the motel. It was a strange procession of cars, trucks, and equipment vans that paraded down the main street of Garber. After picking up some essentials they headed on to the motel.

When they arrived at the motel several of the staff members were outside to greet them. Suzie and Mary slipped away to their room.

“At least here we might have some privacy.” Suzie sighed as she closed the door behind her.

“Oh Suzie, what are we going to do?” Mary turned to face her, just as there was a knock on the door.

Suzie jumped and turned to face it.

“Who could that be?” She grabbed the knob and pulled the door open to find Paul on the other side. “Paul, come in.” She stepped aside as he walked in. Mary sank down at the foot of one of the beds.

“I came as soon as I heard.” He looked between Suzie and Mary. “Are you two okay?”

“I’m not sure.” Mary shook her head and scooted forward on the edge of the bed. “I just keep replaying those last few minutes.”

“You’re going to drive yourself crazy, Mary.” Suzie sat down, swept her close to her and gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Paul, it’s awful. I just can’t believe this happened. I have no idea how long Jason is going to have Dune House shut down.”

“You could always stay with me.”

“Thank you, Paul, but I think it’s better if we stay here. Even though our guests are staying here now, they are still our guests. The moment that Jason releases Dune House we’ll be able to move them all back in.”

“Those that want to go back.” Mary frowned and looked towards the door. “I’m not sure that any will.”

“Trust me, they would much rather be at Dune House than here.” He peered at Suzie. “Any idea what really happened?”

“Just that she was poisoned. We have no idea by who or with what.” She frowned as she tightened her grasp on Mary. “As far as we know Mary was the last one to see her alive.”

“I’m sorry, Mary.” Paul met her eyes. “This must be very hard for you.”

“I have to admit that the hardest part is knowing I’m a suspect.” She closed her eyes.

“I know that has to be very unnerving.” Paul paced slowly across the room. “I just hope that we’re able to figure out what happened here, and fast.”

“Hopefully, Jason will get to the bottom of things quickly.” Suzie stood up and joined him as he paced. “As soon as we know how Cynthia was poisoned that should help point things in the right direction.”

A knock on the door made Mary jump. A part of her, despite knowing that what happened to Cynthia was not her fault, still expected to be arrested. Why not, when she had been just a few feet away as a woman died?

“Are you expecting anyone?” Paul glanced at them.

“No, but it could be one of the guests. I told them they could reach out to us if they needed anything.” Suzie started for the door, but Paul opened it before she could reach it.

“Wes, I’m glad you’re here.” Paul offered his hand, but Wes pushed past him and headed straight towards Mary.

“Mary, I’m surprised you didn’t call me.” He met her eyes and then embraced her. “Why didn’t you?”

“I’m sorry.” She rested her head on his shoulder. “I know how busy you are, and I didn’t want to distract you from that case that you’ve been working on.”

“You should always feel comfortable calling me, Mary, especially when something like this happens. That is what I’m here for. I had no idea until I heard from Jason.” He pulled back enough to look into her eyes again. “I don’t want to be the last one to know.”

“I’m sorry,” Mary murmured as she was comforted by his presence.

“Jason called you?” Suzie raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“He has requested assistance from Parish PD, for the investigation. Our toxicology experts are often tapped by other departments as we have the best resources in the area. Given the fact that this murder will get lots of attention, he would want to make sure all bases are covered and it is solved as quickly as possible.” He slipped his hand into Mary’s. “When I found out what happened, I came straight here. Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She smiled some as she squeezed his hand. “I’ll be fine. Once this is all worked out. I can’t believe she was poisoned.”

“Listen, Mary you need to consider getting a lawyer.” He released her hand then pulled out his wallet and began to thumb through it. “I know of a very good one.”

“A lawyer?” She laughed, then shook her head. “No, I don’t need a lawyer.”

“You do, and you will get one.” He looked up from his wallet and straight into her eyes.

“Don’t be silly, Wes.” She saw a level of forcefulness in his gaze, as if he wouldn’t take no for an answer. “If I hire a lawyer it will just make me look guilty.”

“Mary, I have read the write-up on the case so far, and you are the prime suspect.”

“Prime suspect?” A wave of dizziness washed over her. Luckily, Wes was there to steady her. “Are you certain?”

“Yes, I am. I can’t tell you more than that. Throughout the investigation I won’t be able to help you, Mary, that’s why I want you to hire a lawyer.” He searched her eyes. “Why put yourself at risk?”

“I have no intention of putting myself at risk, Wes. But I’m not going to even entertain the idea that I might be convicted of a crime that I didn’t commit. What will everyone think when they find out that I’ve hired a lawyer? I’ll tell you what they’ll think. They’ll think I have something to hide.” She shook her head. “No, I’m not ready for a lawyer. At least not yet. If things get more serious, you can let me know, and I’ll hire a lawyer then.”

“No, I can’t.” He shoved his wallet back into his pocket. “You’re not hearing me, Mary. I can’t even communicate with you, not much anyway, while all of this is going on. I could risk tainting the case with my personal relationship with you.”

“But Jason sometimes keeps Suzie informed…”

“I am not Jason and under the same circumstances he wouldn’t give Suzie any information. My boss already knows about our relationship, and he has warned me that he will be watching me like a hawk. I’m sorry, Mary, but the best I can do is tell you to hire a lawyer, and clearly you’re not interested in listening to my advice.” He frowned. “I will do everything I can on my end to try to make sure the investigation is accurate, but I can’t influence it.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to.” She stared at him with wide eyes. “In fact, you should probably go. I’m sure you’re not supposed to be here.”

“I’m not.” He leaned close and kissed her cheek. “Promise me you’ll be careful, Mary.”

“I will be.” She frowned as she watched him turn on the heel of a cowboy boot and walk out of the room. He barely shot a look in Paul and Suzie’s direction, then closed the door behind him.

A deep silence filled the room the moment that Wes left. Suzie looked over at Mary with concern.

“Are you okay, Mary?”

“I can’t believe that he won’t help me.” Mary stared at the closed door.

“It’s not that he doesn’t want to, Mary, it’s that he can’t.” Paul frowned as he leaned back against the door. “I know it’s hard to understand, but if he’s caught interfering in a case, he could lose his badge over it.”

“Wes’ whole life is about being a cop.” Mary sighed and looked down at her hands. “I guess I can understand why he wouldn’t be able to help me.”

“We don’t need his help anyway.” Suzie flipped her brassy-blond hair away from her eyes. “We can take this into our own hands. First, we need to figure out who the actual suspects are.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Mary nodded. “Do you have anyone in mind?”

“Well really, as of now, everyone is a suspect.” Suzie rubbed the back of her neck as she considered the options. “Everyone on the crew, everyone staying at Dune House, everyone in town.”

“And me.” Mary piped up with a sigh. “Don’t forget about me.”

“Sweetie, you’re the only one that I won’t even consider as a suspect.” Suzie sat down beside her.

“What about me?” Paul raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t do it.” He raised his hands in the air.

“I know you didn’t.” Suzie laughed. “Thanks for lightening the mood though.”

“Is that what I did? I was just worried that you might think I was a killer.” He winked at her.

“The problem is there’s nothing funny about it.” Mary shook her head. “I want to smile and laugh, but I keep thinking of Cynthia.”

“Of course you do.” Suzie leaned close to her. “It was quite a shock to see her there.”

“Yes. It must have been terrible for Drake.” She cringed as she recalled the tears in his eyes. “He really seemed to care about her.”

“Not to mention Ty. He looked devastated.”

“You know Shawn mentioned to me that Ty asked for her specifically to be on the show. He said that if Ty hadn’t done that, Cynthia never would have been here. I bet Ty feels guilty about that now.”

“Shawn told you that?” Suzie tapped her chin. “I wonder how he knew so much about it?”

“Shawn doesn’t seem to like her one bit. In fact he seemed upset that she was working on the crew.”

“Oh, wait a minute.” Suzie’s eyes widened. “I bet he was the one I heard on the phone, arguing with someone. It was after she got upset with you at breakfast. He seemed irate that someone was working on the crew, but I never put two and two together about who it might be.”

“You think it was Cynthia?” Paul stepped forward. “That might be motive right there.”

“Do you think he would murder Cynthia just because he didn’t want to work on the same crew as her?” Mary shook her head. “That doesn’t make much sense to me.”

“No, but maybe there was more to it than we know.” Suzie narrowed her eyes. “I’m going to look into Shawn and see what I can find out about him.”

“Right now, we need dinner, and then some rest.” Paul glanced at his watch. “The Chinese place around the corner is still open. I’ll grab us all something to eat. What would you like?”

“Thanks Paul, but I don’t think I can eat.” Mary rubbed her hand across her stomach. “I already feel sick.”

“Mary, you have to keep your strength up. If we’re going to get through this, you’re going to need your wits about you. We all are. Just order something, even if you don’t eat it now, we can keep it in

the mini-fridge for later. All right?" Suzie asked.

"All right." Mary nodded. As they placed their orders, her stomach flipped again. She felt so awful that she could almost believe she was poisoned as well. Only the poison that filled her belly wasn't fatal, it was filled with guilt and uncertainty.

Suzie pulled out her phone and began looking up information about Shawn Blunder. She remembered his full name from the registration paperwork.

"Oh, wow." She raised an eyebrow. "He does have quite a social media presence, both his own, and people speaking about him. He doesn't have too many fans it seems. Some of the comments are downright cruel, and border on threats."

"It's strange, he was nice to me. Kind even. I would say he went out of his way to comfort me. I wonder why so many people think differently about him?" Mary peeked at the screen of the phone.

"I'm not sure, I'm trying to sort through all of the colorful language to get to actual information. Oh, here we go. This person says that Shawn's documentary ruined his life, and that he should be in jail for fraud. Ouch." She glanced up at Mary. "Do you know anything about this?"

"No." Mary's eyes widened. "I haven't heard anyone else mention it. What exactly did he do?"

"All I know is there are mentions of the information in his documentary being false, and that some people lost jobs, and their reputations because of it."

"I bet he would tell me if I asked him. He seemed eager to talk before. Maybe I should try to strike up a conversation with him? What do you think?" She looked at Suzie nervously.

"I think it's a good idea. And the sooner the better. If he did do this, then he's not going to be talkative if he thinks anyone suspects him."

"Well, I don't suspect him. He might not have liked her, but the way he spoke to me, made me think he's a respectful young man. I don't think he would have hurt her."

"Perfect, then you should be the one to talk to him." She glanced back at her phone. "I just got a text from motel management that they are hosting a dinner for everyone in the lobby. Too bad Paul already went to get the food!"

"Yes, but maybe Shawn will be there. I'll go see if I can catch him."

“I’ll go with you.” Suzie started to stand up.

“No stay, I don’t know how long I’ll be and Paul doesn’t have a room key. You two eat without me, like I said, I’m not hungry.”

“Okay, I’ll make sure yours gets in the fridge.”

As Mary left the room, Suzie looked back at her phone. She continued to sort through all of the rants that were posted about Shawn. Maybe Mary thought he was a nice guy, but it seemed as if she might be in the minority.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 5

Mary made her way quietly down the hallway. Her muffled footsteps on the carpet still sounded loud to her keenly trained ears. If someone whispered something somewhere, she wanted to hear it. Not only because she wondered what they might think of her, but also because they might be confessing to a horrible crime. Who killed Cynthia? The question played on her mind as she continued into the lobby. It was drowned out by the sound of a large group of people. Just about everyone from the motel was gathered in the middle of the lobby around buffet style tables. The rest were scattered among tables, chairs, and couches. After a few seconds of skimming faces, she spotted Shawn mixed in with the large group of people. He wasn't hard to spot as several people faced him, and all seemed to be arguing with him. As she drew closer she could hear the heated exchange.

"You keep quiet. She's dead now, there's no reason to keep spreading rumors."

"They're not rumors, and I have every reason to. Do you think it's funny to find a note like this under your door?" Shawn held up a piece of paper, that Mary squinted to read.

I know what you did. Murderer.

Her heart skipped a beat. Apparently, Suzie wasn't the only person that suspected him.

"So what if someone put that under your door? Of course, everyone thinks you had something to do with it. I know you were trying to convince Preston to throw her off the set." Marcus's jaw twitched as he glared at him. "Don't act innocent now."

"Of course I tried to get her off the set. You know she's not

supposed to be working anywhere near me. You of all people should be glad she's dead…"

"Shut your mouth!" Marcus pulled his hand back to punch Shawn, but a man beside him grabbed him before he could.

"Enough!" Ty's voice cut through the din and drew the attention of everyone in the lobby. "This is not how this crime is going to be solved. Shouting matches and throwing punches will only make more work for the police and the people of this town. We are still guests here, aren't we?" He looked between Marcus and Shawn. "Leave it."

"No problem." Shawn straightened his collar, then stalked off towards the tall front window that overlooked the parking lot. The tension in the room was thick, but under Ty's steady gaze, the crowd dispersed. Mary was relieved that he was there to break things up before they got too messy.

"Shawn, are you okay?" Mary walked over to him as he separated from the larger group of people.

"Yes, I'm fine. Everyone is just a little tense, I understand it." He frowned as he glanced over at her. "How are you holding up?"

"Not so well." She sighed as she glanced nervously back at the crowd, then to him again. "I just keep thinking about Cynthia, and how innocent she was."

"Innocent?" He laughed, a deep and long laugh that shook his entire body. "I can assure you, there was nothing innocent about her."

"Shawn." She frowned. "You shouldn't talk that way about her. She's gone now, it's best to think of her positive qualities."

"Being dead might be the only positive quality she's ever had." He crossed his arms and started to walk away.

"Shawn, wait." Mary placed her hand gently on his arm and drew him back. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have been so quick to judge. You seem like such a nice person, she must have done something to really hurt you for you to feel that way about her."

"You're right. She did. Before I met Cynthia, I was a good person. At least, I thought I was. I was someone that would never wish harm on anyone, no matter how horrible. But after I met her, I learned that there are some people on this earth who make it their mission to torment you. I trusted her, and she stole from me. She ruined my entire future, and thought that she could just laugh it off as an innocent mistake. But I knew the truth, she had a plan, and

she thought she would be able to take everything from me. Instead, we both lost everything. But I was the hardest hit, my reputation will never be the same."

"Why don't you tell me what happened? I have a good ear for listening. We certainly have plenty of time on our hands, don't we?"

"Yes, we do." He scratched the curve of his cheek. "But I'm not sure that you would really want to hear this story. It's a bit much to take in."

"I would." She searched his eyes. "Maybe it will ease the burden that you carry even just a little if you share with me. It's worth a try, don't you think?"

"No, it will only place a burden on you to hear me whine about things that are in the past. As you said, she's dead. There's nothing more she can do to me now, and there's nothing she can do for me either. Maybe if she lived long enough she would have come around and asked for my forgiveness, but I doubt it. She didn't seem like the type to ever ask for forgiveness."

"I'm sorry you had such a rough time of it with her. What exactly happened?" Mary searched his eyes for any hint of the truth. She sensed that his intention was to dodge her questions, but she thought if she asked enough times he might provide her with at least a clue of what happened between himself and Cynthia.

"It's best not to talk about it. Anything I say can and will be used against me, as we've just witnessed." He tipped his head towards the crowd. "It's pretty clear that Marcus thinks I was involved in his wife's death, which is pretty amusing, since he is the one that should want to murder her. Good luck, Mary." He looked into her eyes one last time, for longer than necessary, then turned and walked away. She gazed after him, more confused than ever. She could understand why Marcus thought that Shawn had killed his wife, but why would Marcus want her dead?

Suzie's eyes hurt from reading all of the comments, some of them were terrible. She was relieved when she heard a knock on the door.

"Suzie, it's me Paul, open up. These boxes are hot."

"Just a second." She rushed to the door and opened it. "Oh, that smells delicious. Thanks so much for getting it, Paul."

"No problem. I'm starving, too. Where's Mary?" He carried the boxes over to the small table near the mini-fridge.

"She went to see if she could speak with Shawn. We both think that he might have been involved somehow. Or at the very least, he was upset with Cynthia for some reason. Yum, egg rolls."

"Yes, there are plenty. Do you think she's okay alone out there?" He frowned.

"I'm sure she is. Mary may seem timid, but she can really handle herself, and when she is determined, she is determined."

"Hmm, sounds familiar." He smiled as he pushed her container across the table to her. "Did you find out anything more?"

"Not really, but I did read the most recent news release about Cynthia's death. Word has traveled fast, they've already announced that she was poisoned. I can only imagine that this is going to make Jason's job even harder."

"Yes, it probably will. But it's going to be nearly impossible to keep a lid on things. Cynthia might not have been well-known, but her death occurred during the filming of a show with popular celebrities. I'm surprised that this town isn't covered in press already."

"Actually, the report didn't mention the location. I'm willing to bet that Preston is going to an awful lot of trouble to ensure that the location of the set is not revealed. If people flock here to spy on the case, then it might make it impossible for Preston to finish filming."

"Good point. I guess he has more influence than I thought."

Suzie smiled before taking a bite of her food. When the door swung open, she looked up to see Mary. "You two missed a near fist-fight in the lobby." She dropped down on the edge of her bed.

"Oh? Who was it?" Suzie turned to face her.

"Shawn and Marcus." Mary sniffed the air. "Oh, that smells really good."

"You should eat." Suzie pointed to the container on the table. "It's still warm."

"Yes, I think I might." Mary joined them at the table. As they

shared the meal she recounted the information Shawn had given her. “Unfortunately, I still don’t know exactly what happened between them, but the animosity he feels towards her is clear, and he’s not even attempting to hide it. I think he’s too angry to pretend that he isn’t.”

“That definitely sounds like motive.” Paul finished the last bite of his food. “Is there anyone else that you think might know the truth?”

“Maybe Ty.” Suzie closed up her container and stuck the leftovers in the mini-fridge. “He and Cynthia seemed close, right? And Ty insisted on having her on the set, even though he knew there were issues.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Mary snapped her fingers. “I’m sure he would know what’s going on. And he’s the one that broke up the fight. He seems pretty involved in Cynthia’s world. But it’s too late to catch him tonight.”

“You’re right.” Paul glanced at his watch. “I should be going, too. Call me if anything comes up, otherwise I’ll be here for breakfast in the morning. You two are not alone in this.”

Mary offered a small smile. She was glad that Paul was so eager to be involved, but it stung a little as she was reminded of Wes’ absence.

After Suzie returned from walking Paul to the car, she settled in her own bed. A second later, she looked over at Mary. “So, what do you think Shawn meant when he said that Marcus should want to murder Cynthia?”

“I’m not sure.” Mary looked over at her through the dim lighting. “But we should definitely find out.”

“I’m sorry, Mary.” Suzie’s voice softened.

“Sorry for what?”

“That you’re caught up in all of this. I keep thinking there might be something I can do to make sure that you’re not a suspect in this investigation. I’ve tried to talk to Jason but he’s not taking my calls or texts. Summer isn’t either.” She frowned. “I know they are married and Jason being my cousin means they have to be extra careful about the case, but it’s so frustrating not to know exactly what’s going on.”

“Yes, I haven’t heard a thing from Wes since he left earlier this evening. But Suzie, you’re already doing everything you can do, by trying to find the real killer. Besides, I’m sure my name will be

cleared soon enough. I have the truth on my side, and that usually wins, right?"

"Right." Suzie's whisper didn't sound convincing as it barely broke through the silence in the room. As both women tried to fall asleep, uncertainty filled the space between them.

Mary turned over in her bed and tried to force out all of the worrisome thoughts. But the moment she pushed one away, five more popped up. It was so easy to assume that everything would be fine, but what if it wasn't? What if she ended up in handcuffs, and behind bars? The very thought made her shiver. But, she reminded herself, that simply couldn't happen. It was impossible. Wasn't it?

Suzie listened for the sound of Mary's subtle snoring. When she didn't hear it, she knew her friend was still awake. Which meant she was worried. Which worried Suzie, too. Her stomach churned, and she doubted that it was from the Chinese food. It was a scary situation, there was no getting around that. She pulled the blanket tighter up to her chin and squeezed her eyes shut. Maybe, just maybe, she would wake up in the morning and find out the case was solved overnight. She could hope.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 6

Early the next morning, Suzie woke from a wicked dream. In it she chased after Mary, who ran in a panic down a long unsteady bridge. No matter how loudly she tried to call out to Mary, the words never left her lips. When she woke up sweat covered her brow. She did her best to breathe as she fought her way out from under the blanket. For several seconds she had no idea where she was. The dark motel room was far different from the bedroom she was used to waking up in. As reality settled in around her she realized that Mary's subtle snoring drifted through the air. As she climbed out of bed, she did so quietly. If Mary needed anything, it was rest. But she couldn't possibly go back to sleep, not after that dream, that still echoed through her senses. She knew the motel's coffee bar opened early and hoped that she might run into someone else who had trouble sleeping.

After dressing, Suzie stepped out into the silent hallway. She guessed that there weren't too many early risers. When she reached the lobby she found it was almost empty, aside from Ty, who stood in front of one of the coffee pots.

"Good morning, Ty." She stepped up beside him to pour herself a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Suzie." He glanced over at her. "I'm sure this is pretty difficult for you, being displaced this way."

"Yes, it is. But it's a small price to pay if the police are able to find Cynthia's killer."

"You're right, it is." He carried his coffee towards one of the tables. "Would you like to join me?"

"Yes, thank you." She added some cream and sugar to her coffee, then settled at the table with him.

"So, what has you up so early, Suzie?" He ran his finger along

the screen on his phone, preoccupied with whatever was on it.

"I like the peace that early morning can offer." She watched as he flicked his finger across the screen.

"I run in phases. Sometimes I have insomnia then I sleep whenever I can."

"Do you have it now?"

He looked up from his phone, almost as if he'd forgotten she was there, and nodded.

"I do. I got about two hours last night."

"I guess, all of this is difficult to process. I can't imagine what it must be like for you when you have to deal with your public image as well as the personal tragedy of the loss of a friend." She raked her gaze over the small reactions on his face, and as she expected, tension rippled along the lines of his lips and the crease of his brow.

"It is difficult. I've known Cynthia for a long time. She played a role in my success." He tucked his phone into the pocket of his suit jacket, then looked across the table at her.

"She did have some problems though, didn't she? Something with Shawn? I heard about the scuffle last night between him and Marcus. You broke it up?" She met his eyes.

"Yes, things got a little out of control. Marcus is upset, of course, and Shawn, he's a target because of his past with Cynthia."

"What can you tell me about Shawn?" She noticed that his face tensed again with that question.

"Shawn?" He rubbed a hand across one eye, then looked at her. The exhaustion was etched into his skin with more pronounced wrinkles and dark circles under his eyes. He seemed to have aged overnight. "He's a good guy, a solid crew member, but I don't know him too well personally."

"You said he had some trouble in the past with Cynthia? Do you know anything about that?" She picked up her cup of coffee and took a sip.

"I don't know." He sighed and stared down into his own cup. "I heard some rumors. Okay, I heard more than that." He grimaced. "The truth is that Cynthia made a pretty big mistake with him. Some people claimed it wasn't a mistake, it was intentional. But I don't think Cynthia would ever do something like that."

"What kind of mistake could have been so bad that there are rumors about it?" She raised an eyebrow.

"A few years ago, Shawn was the hottest thing in ground-

breaking documentaries. He was about to break on to the scene with a controversial documentary, so hyped up that tickets were sold out for the first three showings before the film was even completed. I mean, it was crazy." He chuckled, and shook his head. "There wasn't a single person in film that didn't know his name. It would have launched his career, and he would have had his choice of directors and other producers to work with. However, that's not how it went."

"What happened?" She turned the coffee cup between her palms and did her best to appear casual, but her heart pounded in her chest. It sounded like plenty of motive for murder.

"Cynthia was in charge of vetting and verifying the stories that were presented in the documentary. Shawn insisted that she be very thorough as he didn't want anything to come back on him in the long run. He had a lot of belief in the subject matter of the film, which is why he gave the job to someone else. He felt he couldn't be as impartial as he needed to be. However, not a day after the film was completed a news story broke about it, that claimed several of the people in the documentary were telling fake stories, and backing them up with fabricated evidence. As you can imagine, Shawn was upset, and supposedly when he confronted Cynthia she didn't have a good explanation. I don't know the exact details, all I know is that Shawn had to pull the film, he lost all of the money that he invested and even though there were at least some true stories involved, the entire subject matter became suspect because of the scandal surrounding the documentary."

"Wow, poor Shawn." She frowned. "I can only imagine how heartbroken he must have been."

"Yes, he was ruined." Ty cleared his throat. "I can understand why he'd still be angry. I hate to think it, but it's possible he had something to do with this. I mean, if I were to point a finger at someone, it would likely be him. How could he not be looking for revenge?"

"I guess he would be." She sighed, then took another sip of her coffee. "What was the documentary about?"

"It had to do with genetically modified organisms and chemical toxins in produce. He claimed to have validated proof that some of the fruits and vegetables being sold in grocery stores were actually poisoning…" He gasped as the word slipped past his lips.

"Poisoning people?" Suzie met his eyes, and held them. "His

documentary was about people being poisoned?"

"Well, I mean, not with actual poison. But with chemicals." His voice trailed off. "I'm sure that's just a coincidence."

"It might be. It might not be." She stood up from the table and picked up her cup of coffee. "Thanks for your time, Ty. Again, I'm so sorry about your loss."

"Thank you. It's still hard for me to believe." His cheeks flushed as he closed his eyes. She guessed that emotion was about to overwhelm him, and could sense that he wanted to be alone. As she walked away her mind raced with the information about Shawn. It seemed to her that he had plenty of motive to seek revenge on Cynthia. He'd already lost everything, it might not matter to him to lose his freedom, too.

When Suzie returned to the room, Mary was already awake and dressed.

"Hey, I was about to send out a search party." She smiled.

"Sorry, I woke up early, and then I ran into Ty in the lobby. He had some interesting things to say about Shawn."

"Oh?" Her eyes widened. "What things?"

Before she could answer there was a knock on the door. Suzie jumped, as she was only a few inches away from it. When she opened it to find Jason and Kirk, she felt a wave of relief.

"Jason, what's the update?" Suzie smiled as he stepped through the door.

"Uh, ladies." He pulled his hat off his head and held it tight in his hands. "I'm going to have Kirk ask you a few questions."

Kirk stepped in just behind him. He already had his notepad in his hands, and although Suzie smiled at him, he didn't smile back.

"Why is that?" Mary looked between the two with an apprehensive stare.

“Because, I think it would be best if he interviewed you. He can be more impartial than I can.” Jason cleared his throat, then placed his hat back on his head. “Kirk will tell you everything that you need to know. I’m going to go speak to some of the other members of the crew.”

He stepped back out through the door before Mary could say another word to him. Alone with Kirk, it seemed as if all of the oxygen was sucked out of the room. Kirk was a nice enough man, but he took his job very seriously, and as Jason had implied, he was not as close to Suzie or Mary.

“What is this about, Kirk?” Suzie crossed her arms and settled her gaze on him.

“Actually, I need to speak to Mary alone.” He glanced up from his notepad. “Would you mind stepping out, Suzie?”

“Yes, I would mind actually. I would mind very much.” She moved in front of Mary. “Anything you have to ask Mary, you can ask in front of me.”

“Suzie, it’s okay.” Mary took a deep breath. “I’m sure that whatever Kirk needs to talk to me about can all be cleared up. I have no problem with cooperating with the investigation.”

“But, Mary…”

“Great.” Kirk flashed a brief smile. “Suzie.” He opened the door for her.

“Unbelievable,” Suzie muttered under her breath as she stepped out through the door. She turned back to say something else, but Kirk pushed the door closed before she could speak.

Inside the room, Mary wrung her hands together and did her best to keep her composure.

“It’s bad, isn’t it Kirk?” She stared at him with wide eyes.

“As of now, we are certain that Cynthia was poisoned by something that she ate. There was nothing accidental about it, Mary.” He studied her with such scrutiny that she shivered at the pressure of his gaze. “As I understand it you had a confrontation with Cynthia twice before she died. Is that true?”

“Well yes. I’m not sure I would call them confrontations, but there were two incidents.”

“Can you describe those incidents to me?”

“I don’t think either was a very big deal, but yes I can.” She recounted the issues Cynthia had with her breakfast, and then her reaction to Mary interrupting her with her lunch. “She was quite

upset with me. But I understood that she was just frustrated, and I overstepped by interrupting. As for breakfast, that was my fault, it was an honest mistake, but it was my fault."

"So, you didn't intentionally prepare her food that she was allergic to?"

"Oh, she wasn't allergic to it, she was just on a diet." She shrugged.

"So, because you thought she wasn't allergic to it, you decided to prepare her something with gluten?"

"What?" Mary blinked. "Absolutely not." She stood up from the edge of the bed and frowned. "I would never do something like that. No, she had written it very small at the bottom of a long list of things she could not eat, and I just overlooked it. My eyes aren't what they used to be you know."

"So, your eyesight is failing?" He made a note on his notepad. "Then it might have been possible that you picked up something other than what you intended to use? Say, maybe some rat poison?"

"What?" She laughed, then shook her head. "No, absolutely not. First of all, I would never store poison anywhere near food, and secondly I can see just fine. She just wrote it very small, and I wasn't paying attention."

"So, you did serve her food that she expressly asked you not to?"

"Yes, but not on purpose." She sighed and gazed at him. "Why don't you just get right to the point, Kirk? There's no reason for us to do all of this back and forth."

"Okay, well the point is, you were the last one to prepare her food, and from what we know the last one to see her. We're still waiting on the results from her stomach contents, but I think it's pretty safe to assume that you were the most likely person who could have put something into her food. Since you had a problem with Cynthia, maybe you decided that you would do something to upset her stomach. Maybe you didn't know that it was going to poison her. Maybe you thought it would just be funny, she would feel sick, get an upset stomach, as payback for being so rude to you. I'm sure it was an innocent mistake. You put in too much, or she had a much stronger reaction to the poison than you expected."

"Are you serious?" She narrowed her eyes and took a step towards him. "Kirk?" As she searched his stern expression, her heartbeat quickened. "Oh, my goodness, you are!" She clasped a hand over her mouth, then shuddered. "You can't really think I

would ever do such a thing, can you?"

"I only think what the facts tell me to think, Mary. The facts say that you had access, motive, and the knowledge to be able to poison this woman. Just fess up now, tell me what kind of poison you used, and I'm sure that we can turn this into a case of accidental death. I mean, I'm sure you didn't set out to kill her." His voice softened as he studied her. "This can all go much easier if you just tell the truth."

"I did nothing of the kind!" Each word she spoke sounded like a shriek to her own ears. Her heart pounded, her face burned with a mixture of anger and embarrassment, and she could barely catch her breath. "I would never harm anyone, and would certainly never poison anyone. You have your facts backward, young man, and if you ever accuse me of anything so horrible again I will make sure that you learn your lesson."

"Oh?" He stared at her, his eyes cold, and his brows knitted tight. "Are you threatening an officer of the law? That's quite the temper you have there. If someone says or does something to offend you, you decide you have the right to teach them a lesson? Is that what happened with Cynthia? Did you teach her a lesson, Mary?"

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 7

“Mary!” Paul pushed open the motel room door and burst inside. “Not another word, don’t you say another word, understand me?”

“But Paul, I didn’t do anything!” She could barely hold back the tears that burned in her eyes.

“You!” He turned on Kirk and pointed a finger right at him. “Out of here now.”

“Excuse me?” Kirk narrowed his eyes. “I am in the middle of questioning a suspect.”

“Are you going to arrest her?” Paul took another step towards him, his gray eyes unfaltering. “Are you?”

“Not at this time.” Kirk gritted his teeth. “But that doesn’t mean…”

“It means that you can leave.” Paul crossed his arms and gazed at him with such fury that even Mary was intimidated.

“We’ll talk soon, Mary.” Kirk tipped his hat to her, then stepped out of the motel room.

“Paul, now he’ll think I’m angry at him.” Mary groaned. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“And you shouldn’t be talking to a police officer without a lawyer,” Paul said as Suzie stepped back into the room as well. “Mary, like it or not, as absurd as it may seem, you are a suspect, and you need to realize that.”

“I didn’t kill anyone.” Mary sank down on the edge of the bed again. “I didn’t.”

“Of course, you didn’t.” Suzie sat down beside her and rubbed her hand along her knee. “No one thinks you did.”

“Kirk does.” She sniffled as tears slipped down her cheeks. “You should have seen the way he looked at me, Suzie. I’m sure that he was ready to put the handcuffs right on me. How could he think

that about me? I've never been so mortified. Do I come across as a person that would murder someone?"

"He doesn't really think that, sweetie." Suzie took a deep breath. "He's just doing his job. Paul is right. You're a suspect, and there's no way we can deny that. I'm sure that Jason had Kirk question you because he knew that he could never ask you questions like that and it might be seen as a conflict of interest. I'm sorry, you did nothing to deserve that kind of treatment, but right now it's Kirk's job to try to get the truth, and that means asking a lot of uncomfortable questions. Boy, is Jason going to get an earful from me about the way Kirk acted. I could hear everything through the door. I'm sorry that he treated you that way. But it's time you get a lawyer."

"But I didn't do anything. So doesn't it make me look guilty if I hire a lawyer?"

"No." Paul sighed. "It makes you look smart. Like Wes told you, you need a lawyer to protect you. The facts of the case are pointing right in your direction, and no matter how many times you say you are innocent, unless you can prove that, you are still going to be their prime suspect. So please, hire a lawyer."

"Okay." She wiped away a few more tears that fell. "Yes, I guess I'd better."

"Good." Suzie wrapped her arm around her friend's shoulders. "I already have a few names we can look into."

"And until you have someone hired, do not speak to the police again. If they arrest you, you don't say a word until your lawyer gets to the station." Paul met her eyes. "That's very important, Mary."

"Arrest me?" She rubbed her wrist. "I can't even imagine being in handcuffs. How horrible."

"Hopefully it won't come to that." Paul offered a sympathetic frown.

"It won't." Suzie cut her gaze towards him. "We won't let it. We can't wait around for Jason and Kirk to get to the bottom of this. We need to figure out what happened for ourselves, no matter what it takes."

"I'm in," Paul said. "No matter what."

"I don't want you two to do anything that could get either of you into trouble." Mary wiped her eyes again. "I've caused enough trouble as it is."

“Mary, none of this is your fault,” Suzie said. “You know that, don’t you?”

“It is. If I had just gotten her breakfast right, if I hadn’t interrupted her on set, then no one would have seen her upset with me, and the evidence wouldn’t be pointing right at me. I should have done a better job.”

“No sweetheart, you do an amazing job. What’s happened here is a crime, and the only person responsible for any of it, is the monster that put poison in Cynthia’s food. So, let’s focus on that, all right?”

“Yes.” Mary released a long shaky breath. “Yes, I can do that.”

“Let’s just assume that the food that you gave her was poisoned, Mary.” Paul began to pace.

“What? No!” She shook her head. “It definitely wasn’t.”

“I know you didn’t do it, but maybe someone decided to make it look like you did. Was there anyone hanging around the kitchen? Did anyone come in to taste test, or look through the cabinets?” He paused in front of her. “Anyone at all?”

“No.” She thought for a moment, then pursed her lips. “No, no one. I’m careful about not leaving food out. I can’t think of any time that someone might have slipped poison into the food. I’m sorry. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but I honestly have no idea who could have done this.”

“I have two ideas.” Suzie crossed her arms. “Remember when we talked about Shawn? Well, I just thought about something that Marcus said when we found Cynthia. He said that they were going to work things out and get back together. That means there was some unrest in their marriage. I think it’s possible that she rejected him, you heard the way that she spoke to him when he walked her to Dune House. She didn’t want anything to do with him. Maybe she made it clear that their marriage was over, and he decided to kill her rather than lose her.”

“Oh, that’s possible.” Mary frowned. “I hate to think it, but you’re right. They certainly didn’t act like a happy couple, did they?”

“That’s something we can look into.” Paul nodded. “I’m sure if they were unhappy other members of the crew knew about it. That sort of thing is hard to hide.”

“Yes, Marcus is definitely a possibility. But I also found out some information from Ty about Shawn, and his history with Cynthia.”

Suzie nodded.

As they huddled together, she shared the story that Ty revealed to her.

“If he really lost so much, then I think he should be our main suspect,” Suzie said.

“That may be, but how do we prove it?” Paul rubbed his hand along his chin. “Having motive isn’t enough.”

“No, it’s not.” Mary frowned. “And honestly, I don’t think he did it. I know it sounds like he’s a good suspect, but so do I, don’t I?”

“Mary, you always see the best in people. I get that, and I respect it, and admire it. But in this situation, we need to follow any lead we have, if it ends up not panning out, then that is fine. But it’s still a lead.” Suzie squeezed her hand. “Okay?”

“Okay.” Mary sighed.

“I’ll do some more research on Shawn and see if I can find out anything more about his connection with Cynthia. Paul, did you bring it?”

“Yes, I did, here.” He reached into his bag and pulled out a laptop. “It’s old, but it still works.”

“Great, thank you so much.”

“While you do that, I’m going to go get some breakfast.” Mary picked up her purse and slipped out the door. As much as she appreciated her friends for helping her, she needed the chance to do some investigating of her own.

Mary didn’t stop for breakfast in the lobby. By then it was crowded, and she had no interest in enduring the curious and judgmental looks that others would give her. Instead she walked towards Dune House. It was quite a long walk to get there from the motel, but she needed it. Even though the pain in her knees made it difficult for her to exercise, her body still craved it, and so did her mind.

Whenever she had something to figure out, a good walk helped her get through it. However, she only made it about halfway before she knew she had to stop and rest. Luckily, she was right in front of the diner. She stepped inside to a small crowd, and found an empty spot at the counter. As she eased her way up on to the bar stool, a waitress walked up to her with a smile.

"Hi Mary. What can I get for you?"

"Coffee and toast, please." She offered a small smile. Did she know? Did she suspect her? It was hard to tell, as the waitress always had a sunny disposition. As she began to relax, she heard a familiar voice from behind her.

"Mary. How are you?" Marcus sat down on the stool beside her.

"Marcus, what are you doing here? They're giving away breakfast at the motel." She looked him over from head to toe. He still wore the same clothes he had on the night before. His hair was ruffled, and he clearly hadn't shaved.

"Yes, breakfast and aggravation. I couldn't risk running into Shawn or Ty again. I'm sorry that you saw that last night. I'm not usually like that, I swear." He frowned as he looked over at her. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I should be the one asking you that." She looked into his eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm still trying to process it all." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "I just want you to know, I don't think you had anything to do with this."

"You don't?" She took a sharp breath. "Oh, you have no idea how good it is to hear that. I didn't, Marcus, I really didn't."

"I know." He smiled slightly. "When the police told me that you were their main suspect I laughed in their faces. You're a kind person, and never even said a cross word to Cynthia. Why would you want to kill her?" He shook his head. "I told the police exactly who to look at. Shawn. But for some reason they are dragging their feet on that."

"So you really think Shawn is capable of that?"

"Sure, why not? He's capable of a lot of things." His jaw trembled. It relaxed, when the waitress brought them both their food.

"If you need anything else, just let me know." She winked, then turned and walked away.

"Do you have any proof, any evidence that he might have been

involved?" Mary leaned closer to him.

"Don't you think if I did he'd be in handcuffs already?" He gazed at her for a moment. "Just because my wife and I fought, that doesn't mean that I didn't love her. I loved her so much that I was willing to forgive anything. We would have made things work. But now we'll never have that chance. He took that from us, and I am going to make sure that he pays for that."

"Slow down, slow down." She rested her hand on his arm. "It'll do no good to get yourself thrown in jail, will it? You need to keep your wits about you."

"How can I?" He sighed and stared down at his coffee. "I just don't know what to do. I used to do everything I could to protect her. But it's too late for that now. There is no way to protect her. I can't ever get her back." His eyes filled with tears. "I just keep seeing her there, at the bottom of the stairs."

"Oh Marcus." She slipped her arm around his shoulders. "I'm so sorry. This kind of loss, there's no way to explain it, or make it better."

"There's one way." He shrugged off her touch and met her eyes. "If Shawn is behind bars, it'll make it just a little easier."

"Well, anything you can think of to help with that, just tell the police. They will work hard to make sure that the killer is caught." She picked up her mug of coffee.

"Are you sure about that? Because right now, all I see is them trying to come after you." His tone was harsh as he studied her. "Maybe they're more interested in creating a local scandal than they are in the truth."

"No, that's not the case. I can assure you. They are very good at what they do." She set her coffee back down without taking a sip. "The truth will come out, Marcus."

"If you say so." He turned back to his coffee.

Mary realized she'd lost her appetite again. She left the cash for her and Marcus' breakfast, then excused herself. He didn't seem like a murderous husband, but then, she guessed if he did kill Cynthia, he would be doing his best to cover it up. As she stepped outside onto the sidewalk, she noticed a familiar face at the end of the street. She raised her hand to wave to Wes as he looked in her direction. However, he didn't wave back. He looked right past her, then turned and walked in the other direction. It felt like a slap in the face. It was possible he just didn't see her, but she doubted it.

Her stomach churned as she wondered if perhaps Wes was doing more than just his job. Maybe he was trying to send a message, that he was finished with their relationship. The thought bounced around her mind as she walked back towards the motel.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 8

Suzie looked up when the motel room door opened, and Mary stepped inside.

“Hi, how was your breakfast?”

“Uh, it was fine. I ran into Marcus.” She dropped down on to the end of the bed beside her. “Where’s Paul?”

“He went to run some errands for me. What did Marcus have to say?” She searched Mary’s expression. She was certain that something was wrong, but there was so much going on that she wasn’t sure if it was something new.

“He seems pretty convinced that Shawn did it.”

“Well, he’s not alone. I did some more research on Shawn.” She turned the computer so that Mary could see it. “As it turns out, Cynthia did more than just ruin his future and reputation, she apparently also broke his heart.”

“What?” Mary skimmed over the information on the screen. “Who wrote this?”

“Shawn did. He posted it on social media, and deleted it, but not before a few people reposted it, eventually it ended up being reposted a bunch of times. From the sound of it, she had been having an affair with him.”

“Was she married to Marcus at the time?” Mary finished reading the words and shivered a little. “Wow, he was ruthless in his description of her. It’s hard to believe that he ever had any feelings for her when he uses that kind of language against her.”

“Yes, well in his eyes she did essentially ruin his life. And yes, she was married to Marcus. She’s been married to him for ten years, high school sweethearts and then they married not long after college.”

“Do you think it’s possible that Shawn was lying about their

affair?" Mary took the computer into her lap. "Maybe he was so angry about what happened that he wanted to cause her harm by trying to disrupt her marriage?"

"It's possible. But it didn't work, since she and Marcus are still married." Suzie frowned.

"Maybe that's why he said what he did, about working things out. Maybe he and Cynthia were still trying to work through the affair, or the supposed affair, between her and Shawn. He said to me today that Shawn was capable of a lot of things, and that he was willing to forgive Cynthia for anything. Even an affair?"

"If so, that's quite a long time to be working on things. It's been close to three years since all of this took place. But their history certainly gives Shawn plenty of motive to kill Cynthia."

"But why now?" Mary handed the computer back. "Why would he wait so long to take his revenge?"

"From what I overheard on that phone call, he was livid that she'd been allowed to be part of the crew that he was on. It seems to me that he's been doing his best to avoid her personally and professionally, so perhaps when he was forced to work with her again, everything just came to the surface, and he decided he couldn't take it anymore."

"Yes, it's possible." Mary frowned.

"With his knowledge about chemicals and toxins from his documentary, I'm guessing he could figure out what he could poison her food with. Once Summer is able to isolate the poison, I'm sure all of this will be settled." Suzie placed her hand over Mary's. "It's just a matter of time now."

"Yes." She smiled as she looked over at Suzie. "I'm sure you are right about that."

"Why don't we go out? I just got a text from Paul, he's back at the boat. It would be good to get some fresh air." Suzie stood up and pulled her friend to her feet as well.

"I don't know." Mary glanced towards the window. "I'm sure everyone in town is talking about me being a suspect. I'm not sure that I feel like facing all of that. Even when I was at the diner, I had a hard time. I can't stop imagining what other people must be thinking about me."

"It's all the more reason to face it, Mary. Don't hide away, when you have nothing to be ashamed of, there's no reason to do that. Besides, when all of this is over, we're still going to be living in the

same little town, and the people here need to know that you had nothing to do with this."

"All right, all right." She grabbed her shawl from the dresser and brushed her long auburn hair aside as she put it on. "Some fresh air would be good, and I want to see if Paul has heard anything new. You know how those fishermen like to talk."

"Such gossips." Suzie laughed as she opened the door and they stepped outside.

Mary smiled, but no laughter escaped her. Suzie caught sight of a flicker of pain in her eyes.

"Mary." She paused as they reached the parking lot. "There's something else going on, isn't there?"

"It's nothing." She forced a smile.

"No, it's not. You can tell me, hon, you know that." She took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "No matter what it is."

"Oh Suzie, you know me too well." She sighed and leaned up against the car. "I saw Wes."

"You did?" Suzie smiled. "Did he have anything to say about the case? Is he doing okay?"

"I have no idea." She lowered her eyes. "I waved to him, but it was like he didn't even see me, and then he turned and walked away. I didn't even speak to him. He didn't acknowledge me at all." She looked back up at her friend. "I have a feeling that this case is going to be the end of things for us."

"Oh, Mary don't say that. Maybe things weren't what they seemed. Maybe he really didn't see you. I don't think that Wes would treat you that way." She frowned, then narrowed her eyes. "And if he did, I'll make sure he never does again."

"Just relax, Suzie it's okay. I mean, it's not like I thought things would last forever. Let's just go. It's not that important, I don't want to talk about it anymore." She pulled open the passenger side door.

As Suzie walked around to the other side of the car she tried to think of something comforting or supportive to say, but she was too preoccupied by exactly what she would say to Wes the next time she saw him. Mary was her best friend and as close as a sister to her, but she was more than that. She was a good person who had gone through bad times in her life. She didn't need to endure any more hurt.

Suzie and Mary drove together to the harbor. With Dune House in sight, it was hard for Suzie to hold back her emotion. It had only been a short time since she was there, and yet it seemed like an eternity. She hated to think of what the crime scene investigation team had done to the inside of the house. She'd seen what happened on television shows, where every drawer was emptied, every closet torn apart. She guessed they would have a lot of cleaning up to do when they were finally able to return to Dune House.

Paul met them at the entrance of the boat and welcomed them inside.

"I'm glad that you're here. I just found out some information about the case."

"From who?" Suzie asked.

"Jason."

"Why did he tell you instead of me?"

"I think because I happened to speak to him shortly after he had found out the information. I'm sure he'll share it with you soon."

"What did Jason have to say? What did they find?" Suzie asked.

"It's more about what they didn't find. According to what Jason told me, no poisoned food or drink was found in Cynthia's room at the motel or in her belongings." He frowned. "Presuming it was food that was poisoned, that leads to one particular question. If we know, which we do, that nothing in Dune House contained the poison, then what food was poisoned? Mary, you said you provided all of the food for breakfast, and for lunch on set. Right?"

"Yes, I did. And no, none of it was poisoned. I am so careful with the food, as I would never want someone's vacation to be ruined by a case of food poisoning or even just a food allergy. I do my best to make sure there is no cross contamination, and I clean constantly. I really do try."

"We know." Suzie met her eyes with a reassuring smile. "No one

doubts that."

"I'm sorry." She took a deep breath. "I'm just so sensitive at this point."

"That's all right, Mary. Just know I'm not questioning you, all right?" Paul looked into her eyes. "I'm only trying to help."

"Thanks Paul." Mary managed a small smile.

"Now, if none of the food you provided was poisoned that means that Cynthia must have gotten food from somewhere else, right? So, did you notice anything on the refreshments table near the set? Did you hear about someone offering her food? Did anyone bring in food to breakfast?"

"No. Not that I noticed." She closed her eyes for a moment and thought about the refreshment table. "No, I'm certain there was nothing else on the table. Besides, the entire cast and crew were filming all morning, I'm not sure that any of them would have had time to go and pick anything else up."

"Summer relayed to Jason that the poison was fast acting. It would have killed her within two hours maximum. So, it had to be something that she ingested around lunch time. Mary, you saw her about one o'clock, going to Drake's room, right?"

"Yes. And then, when we found her, it was close to two."

"If her upset stomach was from the poison, then that means we only have about an hour window of when she could have eaten whatever was poisoned." He scratched his hand back through his hair and frowned. "It seems like it would be so simple to solve."

"But, as far as we know she was on set for that entire window." Suzie crossed her arms and began to pace. "So, that narrows down our suspects. The set is roped off, there is security, they're not going to let some random person on set."

"Yes, but Cynthia was part of the crew. She could have wandered off set, but not for long." Mary settled into a chair. "However, that still limits our suspects. If it was Shawn, he would have been on set, so it would have been impossible for him to disappear, lace food, and plant it somewhere that Cynthia would eat it, with no one noticing him going missing, or seeing him tampering with the food."

"I wouldn't say impossible." Suzie tapped her chin. "But very difficult."

"Yes, I'll agree to that. I suppose he could have slipped something into the food on the refreshments table when no one was

looking, but remember, I gave Cynthia's food directly to her. Unless she handed it off to someone, which certainly wouldn't have been Shawn, it couldn't have been tampered with."

"Hmm, if they couldn't leave the set to pick anything up, and they couldn't have gotten to her food to spike it, then maybe someone had something delivered?" Suzie looked between the two. "It's possible that one of the local restaurants or shops delivered to the set. People will do just about anything for a celebrity."

"Yes, you're right." Mary snapped her fingers. "That could have happened. But are you saying you think that someone that lives and works around here would have poisoned the food? If they poisoned a large amount, why did only Cynthia fall ill?"

"No, I don't think that. Cynthia was targeted, and I doubt that she knew anyone around here well enough for them to be so filled with hate that they would want to murder her. But I do think that perhaps someone on set ordered food, and then poisoned that food, before it was given to Cynthia. Considering her dietary requirements maybe she had a special meal delivered, or everyone could have been eating the same thing and the murderer may have made sure that Cynthia got the poisoned portion."

"Yes, that makes sense." Paul nodded. "We can check into that easily enough. Most places will keep records of their deliveries, tomorrow morning we can check with all of the shops and restaurants to see if anyone delivered to the set yesterday."

"Good idea." Suzie smiled. "Now, I feel like we have a direction we can go in."

"Yes, thank you, Paul." Mary forced a brighter smile. "I can't thank you enough for your help."

"Mary, you don't have to thank me. We're friends, and I will always do whatever I can to back you up."

"And the same goes for you, Paul." She stood up. "I think I'm going to step outside for a few minutes."

"I'll come with you." Suzie followed after her out of the boat.

Mary walked along the harbor, with Suzie at her side, and her mind in turmoil. She appreciated her friend's presence, but she also knew that she expected an explanation for her mood.

"I'm sorry, Suzie, I know I should be focused on Cynthia's murder, but I just keep thinking about Wes walking away from me today." Mary frowned. "Do you think he suspects that I did this?"

"Of course not, Mary. He could never. I think he either didn't see you, or he was distracted by the case."

Mary paused beside the railing that lined the water.

"I know it's unreasonable of me to expect him to help me. But I'm in real trouble now. If I get arrested, the kids will find out, and what will I tell them? How will I explain it to them?" She pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders and gazed out across the harbor. "I thought Wes would be a little more supportive I suppose."

"I understand that. I honestly wish he'd be more helpful, too. But he's also restricted by his badge. It's not easy to carry it. You've seen how Jason has had to struggle between helping us and remaining loyal to his role as a police officer. It's very difficult for him." She gazed at her friend's face, and could see the hurt there. It was hard for her not to want to march right up to Wes and knock him on the nose. Mary had always been such a loyal and dedicated friend, she would do anything to protect someone who was in trouble, no matter what risk it caused her.

"Look at Paul." Mary glanced over at her. "He will literally do anything to protect you. He would go out into a stormy ocean in a life raft to keep you safe. He would walk the edge of legal and illegal in a heartbeat if it meant it would help you." She took a deep breath and then released her words along with a sigh. "I really think that he suspects me."

"You really think that?" Suzie's eyes widened. "Wes would never believe that you are capable of something like this."

"No? Then why isn't he protecting me?" She frowned. "It might

be because, just like Kirk said, he has to follow the facts. The facts point to me, and perhaps Wes doubts whether I'm telling the truth when I say that I'm innocent. As you said, he's a police officer, and that badge can be quite a burden to carry. Maybe he doesn't want to be associated with a criminal, with someone accused of something so terrible."

"First of all, you haven't been accused of anything. You haven't been arrested, and you're not going to be. Second of all, if Wes is enough of a fool to suspect something like that about you, then he's not worth your time. He obviously doesn't know a thing about you if he could even for a second imagine that you could be involved in this."

"I know, I know." She closed her eyes. "Maybe that's the most hurtful part. Perhaps I thought there was more between us than there really was. I guess I got a little caught up in the idea of a new love, when really, I should have learned my lesson the first time."

"Just give it a little time, Mary. All of this is going to be cleared up soon. Hmm?" She searched her friend's eyes. "I know there is so much on your mind right now, but the important thing is that you don't lose faith. All of this is going to be in the past sooner than you think."

"I sure hope so." Mary shifted back towards the railing and studied the darkened sky over the still sea. "Because I'm not sure how much more I can take." She shuddered as she tightened the shawl around her. It seemed fitting that a storm would brew as her emotions wreaked havoc on her mind.

"What about Preston?"

"Hmm?" Mary blinked and looked over at Suzie. "What about him?"

"What if he had something to do with this? Maybe the only reason he let Cynthia work on the set was to give him the opportunity to kill her." Suzie gazed down into the murky water near the edge of the walkway. "He's the one that authorized her being on set after all."

"Yes, he did, but why would Preston want to kill her?"

"I'm not sure." She pursed her lips. "But as the director he must know as much if not more about what is happening behind the scenes than anyone else. I'm willing to bet, even if he didn't kill Cynthia, he has a good idea who did. I think I should talk to him."

"Good luck finding him though. He wasn't even staying at Dune

House or the motel. He had his own private suite in Parish." Mary shook her head. "He seems a bit elitist."

"Someone must know where he is though." She thought about it for a second. "Maybe Ty? They would have to be in contact, wouldn't they?"

"I would think so. I have his number. I could check with him." Mary pulled out her phone. "He wanted me to be able to reach him."

"That's nice of him." She rested her elbow on the railing and waited while Mary called.

"Hi Ty, it's Mary. Oh yes, I'm fine thank you. Do you happen to know where Preston might be staying?" She glanced over at Suzie. "He's there now?" A frown crossed her lips. "All right. That's okay. Oh wait, really?" She gave Suzie a thumbs up. "Thanks so much, Ty."

"What is it?" Suzie stepped closer as Mary hung up the phone.

"He told me the hotel he's staying at, but apparently right now he's out to lunch. He invited Ty to join him but he declined. He's at Andover's."

"Wow, that's a bit of a dive for a man like him." Suzie raised an eyebrow. "I think I'll go see if he still wants company."

"I'll come with you." Mary tucked her phone back into her purse.

"No, Mary. I want you well rested for whatever comes next. Besides, it's possible that he will clam up around you, since he knows..." Her voice trailed off.

"That I'm a suspect." Mary sighed. "You're right. Can you drop me off at the library though? I want to check in with Louis about a few things."

"Sure, I will. That's a good idea."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 9

After Suzie dropped Mary off at the library, she headed for Andover's. It was a nice enough restaurant, but it wasn't the type of place she would expect a wealthy director to dine. Though, to be fair there weren't a lot of five star restaurants in Parish or Garber. When she stepped inside she noticed Preston right away. He was hard to miss as he was seated alone at a six-person table and all of the tables around him were empty, while others were packed in pretty tight. She guessed that he'd asked for some space between him and the other diners. She wondered if he'd be willing to let her sit down. After a deep breath and some built up determination she walked over to the table.

"Hi Preston. How are you this evening?"

"Hmm?" He looked up from his phone with a dazed expression. "Who are you?"

"Suzie, I run Dune House with my business partner, Mary." She studied him for a long moment. They'd had at least five conversations, was it really possible that he had no idea who she was?

"Oh right. And?"

"Do you mind if I sit?" She rested her hand on the back of one of the extra chairs.

"Oh, my food is on its way." He caught sight of the waitress as she carried a tray towards them. "I guess, just for a minute."

"Okay, thanks." She settled in the chair and did her best to hold her tongue. He certainly wasn't the most polite man she'd ever met.

The waitress set the pasta down in front of him, then pulled out her order pad.

"What would you like, ma'am?" She smiled.

"No, she's not eating." He picked up his fork and looked at his

plate. “Hm.”

“Is something wrong?” The waitress leaned closer.

“It’s fine.” He set his fork down.

“Preston, have a bite,” the waitress said.

He gazed at the food on his plate, then looked up at the waitress who stood beside him.

“Why are you so interested in me eating?”

“I’m sorry, I’m just such a big fan, and I’d love to know what you think of the meal.” She clasped her hands together in front of her and offered him a sweet smile.

“Uh huh. I’m hesitant to eat anything in this town.” He pushed his food around on his plate. “Who knows what could be in it.”

“I promise, there’s nothing wrong with it. Would you like me to take a bite?” She picked up a fork from the extra settings on the table.

“Yes, actually, I would.” He watched as she scooped up a forkful of his food and placed it into her mouth. As she chewed, she smiled, and offered a soft moan of approval. “It’s really good.”

“We shall see.” He took a bite himself. A second later he nodded. “Not bad, not bad at all. Now, what did you say you wanted?” He looked across the table at Suzie.

“I just wanted to check in with you. I know all of this has to be so frustrating for you.”

“Frustrating?” He stared across the table at her. “Is that really the word that you think I should use?” He chuckled. “Or maybe you just want to hear me be full of myself and say that my work should come before the death of some insignificant person?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to say that.” She cleared her throat, and tried to ignore the fact that he was absolutely right about her opinion of him.

“Sure you would, so would everyone. Do you know that even Ty expected that I would insist on continuing to film? Like I’m some kind of beast.” He shook his head and took another bite of his food. “No, a woman died. Her death needs to be settled the best it can before we begin filming again. I had a friend who pushed through the death of a crew member to get his show ready on time. The stories I heard about the so-called accidents on that set were horrifying. No way, I’m not letting anyone’s angry spirit derail my plans for this show to be a blockbuster hit.”

“Ah.” She blinked, then stared a bit more closely at him. Was he

joking? From the furrow of his brow and his lack of laughter she could only assume that he wasn't. "I suppose that is as good a reason as any."

"Sure it is." He looked up at her. "You know, I argued with Ty about bringing her on. He insisted, and I said, Ty, she's trouble. Every set she's ever worked on, there have been problems. She got herself quite a reputation after that incident with Shawn's film, you know. It was ridiculous that he asked me. But what Ty wants, Ty gets."

"Really? I didn't realize that actors had that much power and influence on a production."

"Ty does. He's already a household name, and if he doesn't put his all in, then my show will stink, and it won't stand a chance. The one good thing Cynthia brought to my show though, was the location."

"The location? You mean here in Garber?" Suzie leaned forward some.

"Yes, she suggested it. I guess she grew up around here somewhere. Anyway, we needed a location on a beach that matched the setting in the script. We needed to keep the location as private as possible and have exclusive use of it so we could film the pilot. It's impossible to book in places like Florida and California, never mind the islands, so when she suggested this place I jumped on it. It fitted our limited budget. I'm surprised more people haven't used it. It's not a big beach, but it does just fine for what we need, and so far the town has been quite accommodating." He paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. "Aside from the murder of course."

"I didn't realize that Cynthia grew up around here. Did she ever mention where?"

"No." He shrugged and finished his bite of food. "I didn't care to ask either. I bet she wishes she'd never had a homecoming now though."

"So, you think it was a local person that committed this crime?"

"Sure, why not? Maybe she went off and lived her dream, and someone back home didn't like that. Maybe she upset someone. I don't know. I doubt it would be anyone on my crew. I mean, why would they risk it?"

"Sometimes people just get angry. I've heard that you were pretty angry with Cynthia on the day she died."

“Angry?” He laughed. “My natural state is angry, honey. When I’m on set, my nerves are on edge. Everything has to be perfect, then one idiot makes one stupid mistake, and we all have to start all over again. Wouldn’t that make you angry?”

“Yes, it probably would.”

“Then you can understand why I was angry with Cynthia. She brought in someone who was unprofessional. That’s basically like spitting in my face.”

“I’m sure it set your timeline behind. That must have been very frustrating.”

“Not as frustrating as having to halt my entire production for a murder investigation.” He pointed his fork at her. “So, before you try to accuse me of anything, consider what Cynthia’s death is costing me. It wouldn’t make any sense for me to cause her any harm, would it?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“No, you suppose not.” He laughed again and pushed his food around on his plate. “Well maybe this isn’t poisoned, but it certainly isn’t food either.” He snapped at the waitress. “Hey! This is disgusting! I’m not paying you a dime.”

Suzie rolled her eyes as she stood up from the table. She decided not to point out that he’d complimented the waitress on the taste shortly before and eaten almost the entire plate before he complained. What would be the point? She fired off a quick text to Mary with the information she had just learned as she walked towards the door. When she left the restaurant, the waitress was in tears. She was tempted to tell Preston exactly what she thought of him, but she didn’t want to alienate him, not just yet. After all, he’d just given them a new lead, one she never would have even considered. Did Cynthia used to live in the area? Could there be someone local involved in the murder?

Mary was relieved to see that the library was mostly empty. Although she'd wanted to be brave and face the rest of the town, she wasn't sure that she had the backbone for it. Luckily Louis greeted her with open arms.

"Mary! It's good to see you. I'm sorry all of this happened under your roof. If there's anything I can do to help just let me know."

"Actually, that's why I'm here." She smiled some as she returned his hug. She could always count on Louis to be friendly, although he was quite harsh to others, especially those that spoke too loudly in the library. "I was wondering if there's a way to look into someone's background, more than just social media. I mean, to look into places they've lived, and worked. That kind of thing."

"Who are we investigating?" He quirked an eyebrow.

"Cynthia. I just feel like I want to know more about her. I didn't have the chance to get to know her very well. Is that possible?" She glanced over his shoulder at his computer.

"Sure. There's a way we can look into that." Louis settled in a chair in front of one of the computers and pushed his glasses up along his nose. He began typing, then paused. "Do you know her maiden name?"

"No, I don't." She frowned.

"All right, let's take a look and see if we can find the information."

As he began typing, Mary's cell phone buzzed with a text. She blushed.

"Sorry, I'll turn the sound off."

"Please do." Louis cleared his throat.

Before she turned the volume down she noticed the message was from Suzie. Her eyes widened when she read it.

"Louis, can you change that search? It turns out that Cynthia may have lived around here at some point. Can you narrow down the search to figure out where?"

"Sure, I can. I just found her maiden name. It's French." His eyes widened. "I know that a French family lived in Parish, but I don't know much about them, maybe she's a part of that family."

"Maybe."

"Cynthia French, did you have an address around here at some point?" After a few minutes, he pointed to the screen. "Here she is as a high school graduate from Parish High."

"Oh wow, Louis, you are amazing." Mary smiled as she peered

over his shoulder at the screen. “Is there a home address?”

“Yes, I’ll get it for you.” He jotted it down on a slip of paper and handed it to her. “I can’t tell you if she’s related to the people that currently live there, and I’m not sure how much it will help, but I hope it does.”

“Thank you so much, Louis.” She grasped the paper tightly. In that second it seemed as if it was the first promising lead that might unravel the truth about Cynthia’s death.

“You’re welcome, Mary.” He caught her hand and held it for a moment. “I just want you to know that I never thought you were involved in any of this, not for a second. Okay?”

“Yes.” She sighed with relief. “Thank you, it means a lot to me to hear that.”

“Tell Suzie I say hello, and I am well aware that she has not returned that overdue library book yet.” He straightened his tie. “Those fines add up you know.”

“Oops, yes I will tell her. I’m sure she will get it back in right away.”

“See that she does.” He swiveled on his chair back to his computer.

She tucked the address into her pocket and hurried out of the library. Just as she stepped outside, Suzie pulled into the parking lot.

“Mary, I’m so glad I caught you.” She pulled up close to the curb.

“Me too.” Mary settled into the passenger seat. “When you texted me that Cynthia lived somewhere nearby at one time, I asked Louis how to find her previous address, and he found it for me.” She presented the slip of paper. “It’s possible that someone she knows still lives there, or nearby.”

“Yes, you’re right.” She typed the address into her GPS. “We should check it out. I had such an interesting conversation with Preston. I don’t think we can rule him out as a suspect.”

“Really? It seems like a huge risk for him to take.”

“Sometimes people get so full of themselves that they truly believe they can get away with anything, including murder. It’s possible that he just lost his temper.”

“But losing your temper doesn’t usually lead to murder by poisoning someone. That’s more of a pre-meditated situation.”

“Yes, you’re right about that. However, I still think he’s a

possible suspect. Just the way he spoke about her turned my stomach. Then of course, there's always Marcus."

"Yes, Marcus. He had the opportunity and motive, too."

"You know I was thinking, there's this philosophy of once a cheater always a cheater. What if she started a relationship with someone new?" Suzie glanced over at her. "If Marcus found out, it would have killed him."

"That's true. I'm not sure that I agree with that theory. But it could have happened. She did seem pretty close to the actor she was defending on the set when I brought her lunch. Maybe it was him?"

"Maybe. There's only one way to find out. But first, let's see where this address leads us."

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 10

The GPS led Suzie and Mary into Parish. It was a fine town, a bit bigger than Garber, with a much busier beach that attracted many more tourists due to its size. It was without the quaintness of little shops and perfectly manicured lawns. It was a mixture of urban and small town, with tall shiny buildings, and neglected old block houses. It boasted a much larger police department, of which Wes was one of the finest detectives. Thinking of him, reminded Suzie of how he treated Mary. It worried her, too, as she wondered if he knew more than he was willing to say. Was it possible that there was so much evidence against Mary that an arrest was inevitable?

"Are you sure this is the right address?" Suzie glanced over at Mary as she pulled to a stop in front of the location that the GPS identified.

"Yes, that's the address that Louis gave me. But he did say he had no idea who lived there now." She scanned the overgrown front yard and boarded up windows.

"I don't think anyone does, and probably no one has for quite some time." Suzie pushed the car into park, and frowned. "I guess this was a wasted trip."

"Not necessarily." Mary pointed towards the houses on either side of the abandoned home. "The neighbors might know something about Cynthia. Should we ask?"

"That driveway has a car in it. Let's check it out." Suzie stepped out of the car, and Mary followed behind her. When Suzie knocked on the door, a stout young woman answered within seconds.

"Yes? Can I help you?" She had a bright smile on her face.

"Hello, we have some questions about the property next door."

"Oh, I was so hoping that you were from code enforcement. Finally, all of my complaints are paying off!" She pushed open the

screen door. “Come inside, I can tell you everything.”

“I’m sorry for the confusion, but we’re not from code enforcement. We’re here trying to track down information about a woman named Cynthia French. Did you know her?” She searched her eyes with fading hope. She looked too young to have lived in the house for too long.

“Oh, you aren’t code enforcement.” Her smile slumped. “You have no idea how frustrating it’s been for me. I call, and call, and no one comes out to do anything about this property. It’s horrible. The bugs in the summer are the worst, and then of course the neighborhood kids think it’s a good place to hide out and do their drugs. It’s just a hazard!” She still stepped aside to allow them inside. “Cynthia?” She walked over to her couch and sat down. “What do you want to know about her?”

“Did you know her?” Suzie sat down in an armchair, while Mary perched on the other side of the couch.

“Sure. We grew up next door to each other. At one point we were friends. Of course, that all changed when she became too good for everyone in Parish.” She rolled her eyes. “I guess karma really does bite you eventually, huh? All of her fancy connections don’t mean anything in the great beyond, do they?”

“So, you’ve heard?” Suzie narrowed her eyes some. “It must have been quite a shock to hear that your childhood friend was murdered.”

“Not really. She had that kind of personality that rubbed people up the wrong way. I’m amazed she made it out of Parish without more scars and stitches than she had. She was always getting into fights at school.”

“Fights? About what?” Mary turned on the couch some to face her.

“She had this idea in her head that she was going to be a star. Now, here’s the thing about that, she came from one of the poorest families in Parish. That’s why the house is the way it is. Cynthia’s family lost the place to foreclosure years ago. They kept saying she was going to help them out, but I guess the check never came. The padlock did, and it’s been sitting like that empty ever since.” She rolled her eyes. “So, the whole neighborhood has to pay the price. Anyway, she never shut up about being this big star, and making it rich. It irked people and they would pick at her about it. When Cynthia had enough she would blow up and attack them. Tempers

run in that family."

"You must have known them pretty well." Mary rested her hands in her lap. "Do you know where Cynthia's parents went?"

"They took the boy and moved away. I have no idea where. One evening they were there, the next morning they were gone. It was a little creepy to be honest. I would have called the cops if it weren't for the cops and bank showing up the next day with the padlocks. I guess they decided to just leave everything behind." She shrugged.

"You mentioned a boy, was that Cynthia's brother?" Suzie scooted forward in the chair. "I didn't realize she had a sibling."

"Yes, he was a few years younger than her, not quite eighteen when they lost the house. Ryan." She nodded. "His name was Ryan. A nice kid, shy. Not like the rest of them."

"Ryan?" Mary repeated the name as her eyes widened. "Are you sure that's his name?"

"Yes, like I said, he was a nice kid. As far as I know when they lost the house, he had to leave school and his friends. I always thought it was really sad for him. They kept saying that Cynthia was going to pull through and take care of the late payments, but she never did." She shook her head. "Now, I'm left to deal with the eyesore."

"That must be very frustrating." Suzie cleared her throat. "Is there anything else you can tell us about Cynthia? Did she have a boyfriend?"

"No, not just one, anyway. She dated around. She always went for the bad boys, and then she would cheat on them, and the boys would beat each other up over her. It was pathetic really. She always gloated about how she could get them to fight. Honestly, she just became this terrible person." She glanced at her watch. "I have to go. I'm working a late shift tonight. Good luck with your search, ladies."

She walked them to the door.

As soon as they were back in the car, Suzie looked over at Mary. "Ryan is her…"

"Brother!" Mary finished for her.

"It's possible that it's a coincidence. They have different last names."

"Yes, but maybe he changed it if he wanted to get into acting, or they had different fathers."

"Ryan is a very common name." Suzie tucked her lip under her

teeth and gnawed for a moment. “But, what are the chances?”

“We know that Cynthia insisted on Ryan being hired. She basically risked her job for it. So maybe she was trying to look out for her kid brother?”

“Hm. Think about it, Mary. If she really did abandon her family, cause them to lose their house, and be ridiculed by their neighbors, maybe Ryan was looking for revenge?”

“Against his own sister?” She cringed. “I hate to think that’s a possibility, but you’re right, it very well could be. I think it’s time we had a conversation with Ryan.”

“Absolutely, the only question is, will he be willing to talk to us?” Suzie turned down the road that led back to Garber. “I hope that we can figure out what really happened to Cynthia. If Ryan is her brother, and he didn’t do this, I can’t imagine the pain that he’s going through.”

“I think he’d be willing to talk to me. It’s getting a bit late now. Maybe I should go on my own tomorrow morning.” She glanced at Suzie. “Is that okay?”

“Sure, it is. But if you need backup, you know I’ll be there.” She smiled.

“Thanks Suzie.”

After breakfast the next morning Mary headed straight out in search of Ryan. It didn’t take her long to find him. She strolled along the harbor, then down into the small park that bordered both the harbor and some open span of beach. It was a popular place for tourists, and she noticed him perched on one of the benches closest to the entrance.

“Hi Ryan.” Mary sat down on the bench beside him.

“Hi.” He shifted his feet against the grass then glanced over at her. “Mary, right?”

“Yes. How are you holding up?”

“Better than you.” He scuffed his shoe across the ground. “I know that people think you did it.”

“Some people might.” She shrugged as she stared at her hands, which rested on her knees. “But I didn’t.”

“I didn’t think you did.” He wiped at his brow. “You don’t seem the type to do something like that.”

“Thanks.” She scooted a little closer to him on the bench. “You and Cynthia were friends, weren’t you?”

“You could say that. She helped me out.”

“How did you two meet?”

“At a casting call. I was there, and she was there as a support person. She was going to help pick out those that would be selected to move on to the next stage. I didn’t make it, but she gave me her card and told me she knew of the perfect acting job for me. Something to get my foot in the door that would probably lead to some bigger acting jobs.”

“This one?” Mary glanced past him at the people that walked along the street.

“Yes. She said she’d make sure I got in.”

“Did she ever tell you why?”

“She said she knew what it was like to start out, and that I needed some polishing, but that I had what it took to really make it. I didn’t know whether to believe her or not. But it turned out she was right, she got me the role, and I messed it up, like always.” He rolled his eyes.

“What makes you think that?” She studied him closely.

“You heard the way Preston yelled at me. You were there. He wishes I was never part of the show.” His cheeks flushed.

“I think he’s just a temperamental person. He probably didn’t mean it.”

“He meant it.” He took a deep breath. “And he’s right. I wasn’t ready for this. I thought it was what I wanted, but it was just too much too fast. I was going to quit, but Cynthia told me that she would look like a fool if I did. She insisted I stick it out. So I tried.” He rubbed his hand through his hair. “But it didn’t get any better.”

“And now, are you going to quit?”

“I don’t know.” He looked over at her. “I should, shouldn’t I? But, a part of me feels like I still owe her. Maybe I owe her even more now that she’s gone.”

“It would be a nice way to honor her memory I think, if you stuck it out. But you have to do what’s right for you.”

“Yes, I’ll think about it.”

“I guess you spent a good amount of time with her, working on things.” She met his eyes. “Did she ever mention why she was so interested in you?”

“No, I don’t think there was any special reason, she just wanted to help me. I felt like her project. I don’t know, maybe she was trying to live her dreams through me or something. She told me that she wanted to be a star, but never had the look to be in front of a camera.”

“Hmm, maybe that was the case. I’m sorry that you lost your sister, Ryan. And, for what it’s worth, I’m sure Cynthia really knew her stuff. If she thought that you had that special something, then I bet you do.”

He froze, at the word sister, just as she expected him to.

“What did you just say?” He looked over at her with wide eyes.

“I know she was your sister, Ryan.” She placed her hand over his. “I know that you had a very hard life growing up, and that your parents lost their house. Is that when you went to Cynthia for help?”

“No.” He rolled his eyes. “I would never do that. She came to me. It was like all of a sudden she grew a heart. She showed up one day at the place I was staying and said she would get me a job, get me into show business. I wasn’t sure about it, but she insisted. I figured it couldn’t hurt. But she told me that we had to keep our relationship a secret, or it might hurt my ability to get hired.”

“I see. Was she always trying to help you when you were younger? Were you two close?” She listened attentively to every word he spoke.

“No, we weren’t close. In fact, I spent most of my life believing that she hated me. It was hard not to think it, since she was always shouting it in my face.” He narrowed his eyes.

“That sounds rough.”

“It was. But it wasn’t really her fault. Our parents were horrible. The only time they would speak to either of us, was to yell, or to make us fight. It was ugly, real ugly. When they lost the house, I thought they’d hunt her down. But they didn’t. They just disappeared. I found a friend’s couch to crash on, and tried to figure out what I would do next. Then out of the blue she showed up, too

late for the house, but maybe that was because she didn't want to do anything that would help them."

"It's nice that the two of you patched things up."

"We didn't exactly." He peered over at her. "She got me this job, and everything, but it wasn't like all of a sudden she was all hugs and kind words. She still kept her distance. I thought maybe if I told her I forgave her for taking off the way she did, it would ease some of the tension, but instead she got angry. She went off on a rant about how she didn't owe our parents anything, and that I should learn to be independent like she was. I don't know, I think she expected me to be like her. But I'm not."

"You don't have to be, Ryan. It must have been hard for you to lose your home like that." She pursed her lips for a moment. "Were you ever angry at Cynthia for letting that happen?"

"No. Not really. My parents wanted people to think that she was some rich person, and that she planned to take care of them. But she never said she would do that. She didn't talk to them at all. They were not kind to either of us, but they were really hard on her. Maybe because she was the oldest." He looked down at his hands, then looked up at her again. "I was really just getting the chance to know her, and now she's gone."

"I'm sorry, Ryan. I can only imagine your grief. It's not going to be easy, but you will get through it."

"Thanks, Mary." He smiled at her as she stood up. "You're a very sweet person."

"Good luck." As Mary headed back towards the car, she thought about Cynthia. She'd heard plenty of stories about how terrible she was, but knowing she'd taken her younger brother under her wing, revealed a different side to her. She wasn't just demanding or cruel, she cared enough to steer Ryan in the right direction.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 11

After Suzie returned from breakfast she had just settled into the motel room to do some research when she heard a knock on the door. When she opened the door, she found a maid on the other side.

“Ma’am, would you like your room cleaned?” She smiled.

“No thanks, I can take care of it.” Suzie smiled in return, then swung the door closed. She’d hoped it would be Jason, saying that it was time to go back home. The thought made her pull out her phone. She dialed his number, then began to pace. She knew he couldn’t tell her much, if anything about the case, but she also needed to speak to him. She needed to feel connected, even if she truly wasn’t. After two rings, he answered the phone.

“Hi Suzie. I’m sorry, I can’t talk long.”

“That’s all right. Anything new on the case?”

“I can’t tell you, you know that.”

“What about an estimate of when we can get back into Dune House? That shouldn’t be breaking any laws, I just want to know when I might be able to go back home. Is that so much to ask?” She took a breath to try to calm down. Despite the fact that she fully intended to be kind and patient with him, when she actually got on the phone, she found that her mouth raced to keep up with the pattern of her heartbeat.

“Okay, okay, slow down. I know this is difficult for you, but keep in mind, we have a victim in the middle of all of this.”

“I do understand that, of course I do, but how long can it take to process the house? You have to be getting close to being done now.”

“Nothing left unturned.” He cleared his throat. “That’s the only way to solve a crime like this.”

“Jason, you have to give me something here. It’s been two days. When do you think we can be back in Dune House?” She pressed the phone against her ear so that she wouldn’t miss a single thing he said.

“I know you’re frustrated, but there’s not much I can tell you. It’s a large place with a lot of contents and that takes time.”

“Look, I don’t want to interfere in the investigation, you know that, but it’s just making me so uneasy to be away from there. And to think of police officers rifling through my underwear drawer.”

“Yes, I can see why that would make you uneasy.” He chuckled.

“It’s not funny, Jason! How about if I go to your house and dump out all of your drawers?” She took a deep breath to calm herself down. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re right. It’s not funny. I know it’s uncomfortable. I can tell you that the only reason it’s taking this long is because of what we haven’t found. There’s no evidence of any poison yet, and so the investigation has to continue to rule out it being hidden anywhere in the house. I’m sorry. I wish it could go faster, but it’s impossible. The officers are working as quickly as they can.”

“And what is going to happen when they don’t find any poison? Will we be able to move back in? Will Mary still be a suspect?”

“Until we can rule her out completely, yes, I’m afraid she will continue to be a suspect. But once Dune House is cleared, you’ll be able to move back in right away. I’m hoping it will be by this afternoon, but that’s not a guarantee. It’s the best that I can do.”

“I’ll take it.” She snapped her fingers as she hung up the phone. To be back home by the afternoon seemed like an impossible dream while surrounded by the four walls of the motel room. But she longed for it. Home.

“Hey, it’s me.” Mary announced her arrival before she pushed the door open.

“How did it go? Did you find him?” Suzie set her phone down on the table and looked over at her friend.

“Yes, and he admitted that he’s her brother.” Mary dropped her purse on the same table.

“How did he seem? Resentful? Angry? Do you think it’s possible…”

“No, I really don’t.” She dropped down on to the edge of her bed. “He said their parents are awful people who never did anything to take care of them. If anything, I’d say he was grateful to

Cynthia for reaching out to him."

"What about the parents?" Suzie raised an eyebrow. "They could be involved, don't you think?"

"I'm not sure. The way he spoke about them, it seems they were possibly involved in drugs. He hasn't heard from them since they lost the house and disappeared. It's possible, but I don't think it's likely, that they were involved." She rubbed her hand along the curve of her cheek. "So, we're back to square one I think."

"Not quite." Suzie sat down beside her and tossed an arm around her shoulders. "Jason said we might be able to go home this afternoon."

"Home." Mary nodded and a soft smile creased her lips. "That would be nice. No other news?"

"I'm afraid not. We still need to canvas the shops to see if we can find anyone that might have delivered food to the set. Why don't we do a bit of that now? Are you up for it?" She grabbed her phone.

"Sure, hopefully we'll turn up something." Mary slipped her purse back on her shoulder.

Just as Suzie and Mary stepped through the door, Paul strode down the hallway towards them.

"Ladies." He smiled at them, but the expression was tight. "How is everything?"

"So far so good. Jason said we might be able to go home this afternoon." Suzie kissed his cheek. She noticed the tension in his jaw. "Is everything okay with you?"

"I just saw Wes in the lobby. He was speaking to Ty, and it didn't look like the conversation was going well." He glanced over his shoulder, then back at them. "I think he might be on to something, but I doubt he's able to share it with us. However, it

made me think about just how close Ty and Cynthia were. I wonder if he might be hiding something."

"Like what?" Mary narrowed her eyes. "You think he knows more than he's saying?"

"He's the main actor, the star of this show, if something were to go wrong, say Preston were to be arrested for Cynthia's murder, the entire show might be scrapped before it even gets off the ground. I can't help but wonder if he might be trying to protect Preston to prevent that from happening. I know it doesn't make sense that Preston would kill Cynthia, but I'm guessing that Ty might just be hiding the connection that makes it all make sense. I saw Preston and Ty together twice yesterday and both times their body language told me that the conversation was not friendly."

"Wow, I thought Ty wanted this murder solved as much as we do." Suzie shook her head. "I guess it's possible that he's hiding things. We should talk to him again, maybe this evening? Right now, we're going to check in with the different restaurants and stores to see if anyone delivered anything to the set."

"Oh, I already canvassed most of them. No one had. Here's my list." Paul thrust it out to her.

"Paul, you've been working hard." Suzie looked at all of the places crossed off the list.

"I wish I could say that it led to something good, but so far it's been nothing but dead ends. What about Cynthia's connection to Parish?"

"She definitely had one, she grew up there, and Ryan is actually her brother. But that's as far as that lead got us so far. We don't think Ryan had anything to do with it."

"Though it's still a possibility." Mary raised her hand in the air. "He seems like such a sweet young man though."

"Well, if murderers acted like murderers it would be much easier to catch them." Paul slipped his hand into his pocket. "Here." He held out a folded-up piece of paper to Mary. "This is what I found out about Cynthia's recent movements in town. When I canvassed the restaurants, I asked about her as well. She didn't frequent many of the restaurants, but she did spend a lot of time at the new coffee shop on the Parish border. Maybe she was meeting someone local there? The person I spoke to couldn't recall. Maybe they'll be more talkative with you." He raised an eyebrow.

"Thanks Paul." Suzie wrapped him up in a tight hug. "You're

amazing."

"Just be careful." He gave her a quick kiss. "The closer you get to the truth, the more dangerous all of this becomes."

"Yes, he's right." Mary glanced down the hallway. "I'm sure the murderer will do whatever it takes to protect him or herself."

"Then we have to make sure that we get to them first." Suzie met Mary's eyes with a determined stare.

"Absolutely."

"I have to do some work on the boat to make sure it's ready for my next trip. I'll check in with you both later, but if anything comes up, let me know right away." Paul nodded to them, before he turned and headed back down the hallway.

About an hour later Suzie and Mary reached the last name on the list. It was the small Chinese food restaurant that Paul had gotten take-out from the night before, and it was closed.

"I doubt that anyone ordered Chinese and had it delivered. Plus, with all of Cynthia's dietary restrictions, I don't think that she'd be able to eat at a place like this." Suzie crossed the name off the list. "Which leaves us with nothing."

"Another dead end." Mary sighed as she gazed out the window.

"We have to be missing something. The food had to come from somewhere. It wasn't from Dune House, it wasn't from any of the local restaurants. Who else would deliver food?"

"Oh! What about Brad's Brownies?" Mary looked over at her. "I don't think he delivers, but maybe he made an exception."

"That's a good thought," Suzie said. "But are brownies vegan and gluten free?"

"I'm not sure."

"Let's head over there and find out."

It was a short drive to Brad's Brownie shop. Although, Mary knew it

was a long shot, she hoped that he would have some clue to give them. Brad was busy with someone at the counter when they stepped in. Suzie wandered off to browse while Mary did her best to listen in on the conversation. The person inquired about whether he could mail a package to another state.

"Sure, I can do that. I have to tell you though, the brownies are the best fresh."

"That's all right, I'm sure they'll still like it." The man at the counter, who wore flip-flops and a wide brimmed hat, was obviously on vacation. It wasn't quite warm enough to be called summer yet, and although many people enjoyed the beach at this time, most of the locals waited until it hit the perfect temperature. They concluded their business and Mary smiled at him as he left the shop. She was always especially warm to tourists, not just because the bed and breakfast relied on them, but because the entire town did during the summer season. She knew what it was like to be a new resident in Garber, and though the small town was friendly, the lifetime locals had a special bond. Brad was one of them.

"Hi Brad." Mary leaned against the counter. "How is business?"

"Booming." He studied her for a moment. "I guess I shouldn't ask how things are at Dune House."

"Probably best not to." Mary frowned. "We've had some trouble."

"Yes, I'd say so. You never know what's going to happen when you have all of these out-of-towners staying in your place."

"You're right." Mary nodded. "No one could have expected this, that's for sure."

"Honestly, I'll be glad when all of these Hollywood types clear out of here. I'm never one to decline a customer, but some of them are just far too demanding. Mary, try some of my latest. It's peanut butter spice. Maybe you can guess what the spice is?" He lifted the lid on the sample tray.

"Sure." She smiled, perhaps genuinely for the first time in a few days. When she dropped the piece of brownie in her mouth she was surprised by the taste. There was definitely peanut butter, but there was something else, too.

"Oh? Have you had many orders from our visitors?" Suzie paused in front of the counter and joined their conversation.

Mary couldn't speak as her mouth was full of brownie, but her eyes widened.

“Yes, two too many. The first one was from the woman who died, Cynthia, right?”

“Right.” Suzie nodded.

“Well, I can tell you that it wasn’t my brownies that poisoned her.”

“You can?” Suzie asked.

“Yes, the police believed that Cynthia might have been poisoned by some brownies here so they closed us down for a little while when they searched the store. They didn’t find anything, of course.”

“When did she order from you?”

“Right after everyone arrived. Apparently, I’m the only place that offers a vegan gluten free treat. Of course, when she placed her order she grilled me about what was really in it, and whether I could prove what ingredients I used. Who asks something like that?” He laughed, then shook his head. “I guess I shouldn’t laugh about that.”

“It’s all right.” Suzie patted the back of his hand. “What about the second order? Who did that come from?”

“Actually, I never got his name. But he was just as demanding. He ordered the gluten free vegan brownie bites as well and even asked me to make sure that I gave him an extra box as he was going to share the brownies with a friend. Of course, he didn’t pay for an extra box, but I gave it to him anyway. I’m guessing it was a special friend, since he made a special request.”

“What request was that?” Mary stepped closer to the counter with the taste of the brownie still on her tongue.

“He asked that the brownie bites be cut in the shape of a heart. He said he wanted it to send a message. I thought it was weird, since he only wanted two pieces, and two boxes. The brownie bites are quite small.” He smiled. “I honestly didn’t mind doing that so much. I wished him luck when he picked up the boxes, but he never said a word to me. He wouldn’t even look at me. Just walked out, as if I didn’t even exist.”

“Ouch. That’s rather rude.” She frowned. “Do you remember what he looked like?”

“He looked like he wore a hat, sunglasses, and a scarf. With his bulky jacket I couldn’t even tell you if he was a slender man. But I can say that he wasn’t particularly tall or short, just average. Why?”

“Did he pay with a credit card?” Suzie held her breath as she waited for the answer.

“No, I’m afraid not. It was cash, and like I said I never caught his name.”

“Is there anything at all you can remember about him? His accent maybe?” Suzie looked into Brad’s eyes.

“No, he didn’t say much. I will say he didn’t seem like he was from around here.”

“You did assume he was one of our guests though?” Mary asked.

“Yes, when he opened his wallet he had one of your room keys in it. I didn’t see anything else, just that.” He shrugged. “I hope he doesn’t give you as much trouble as he gave me.”

“You said he paid, so was it just his picky request that bothered you?” Mary studied his expression.

“No, it was more than that. I mean he had sunglasses on, but it was as if he looked straight through me. He called his order in ahead and was only here for a few seconds. But in those few seconds, I just felt like I was nothing to him.” He lowered his voice. “That probably sounds weird, it’s weird for me to say it. I guess, he just unnerved me.”

“Interesting.” Suzie pulled out her phone. “I wonder if Jason has worked out who it is. Maybe he pulled the phone records, and was able to connect it back to someone staying at Dune House.”

“You can suggest it to him.” Mary nodded. “Thanks for your time, Brad, sorry that you had to deal with that.”

“I’m just sorry about everything that’s happened over the past few days. I hope you don’t think poorly of me for saying it, but I hope the scandal doesn’t affect our summer income.”

“I hear you.” Suzie sighed as she looked up from her phone. “I’m not sure how Dune House is going to rebound from this, but I hope that it will.”

“It will.” Mary gave her forearm a light squeeze. “Nothing to worry about. Oh, and it’s cinnamon, isn’t it?”

“You got it!” Brad grinned. “What do you think? It gives it some pop, right?”

“Yes, it’s good.” Mary’s smile faded some as she thought of what secret ingredient the killer might have added to Cynthia’s brownie. As she walked towards the door, the sweet taste in her mouth soured some.

“Who do you think it was that ordered the brownies?” She held open the door for Suzie as they headed back to the car.

“I’m not sure, but I think we’re getting closer. It’s an odd order

to make, don't you think?"

"It's a romantic order." She settled into the car, and smiled as they sped off. "You don't make such special requests unless you're trying to impress or woo someone."

"So, you think?" Suzie glanced over at her. "Marcus?"

"I suppose so. But I don't think poisoning brownies is very romantic."

"No, neither do I." Suzie frowned.

A part of Mary hoped it wouldn't be Marcus. She wanted to believe that the man truly loved his wife, and that he would do anything to please her, not that he would poison a delicious treat.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 12

Suzie and Mary headed for the coffee shop. It was their best bet for finding out who Cynthia spent her last moments with. Located at the border of Garber and Parish it was a tiny place, with funky colors and art-filled windows.

“This is the coffee shop.” Suzie turned off the ignition and tucked her keys into her purse. “Have you ever been here before?”

“No, it only opened a few months ago and I usually just go to the diner.” Mary studied the exterior of the building. “It seems like an artsy place.”

“Yes, it does.”

“Let’s hope we can get more out of them than Paul did.” Mary stepped out of the car. Suzie followed after her. When they stepped inside they were greeted by a barista at the counter, and another woman who appeared to be serving as a waitress.

“How can we help you?” The barista smiled.

“I’ll take a coffee, with cream and sugar please. Oh, and one of those blueberry muffins.” Suzie pointed to the display case with over-sized muffins in it.

“Sure, those are our most popular muffins.” As she turned around to prepare the coffee, Suzie continued to talk.

“I guess you heard about the death at Dune House?”

“Sure, everyone has. I wonder how anyone could ever stay there again. I mean, what if it’s haunted?” She turned back with the coffee.

“I can assure you, it won’t be.” Suzie smiled as she accepted the coffee. “Mary, you don’t want any coffee?”

“No, thanks.” Mary glanced over the photographs hung on the wall. “Who are all of these people?”

“Oh, they’re people who come in for our open mics. We have a

couple of them a day. Some are poets, some are dancers, singers, whatever."

"Actors?" Suzie looked over at the barista intently.

"Yes, those too." She pointed to one of the photographs.

"There's Cynthia," Mary said.

"Did she perform?" Suzie accepted a plate with a muffin on it.

"Yes, a few times."

"Did she have any fans?" Mary grinned. "Admirers?"

"Uh." She looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then nodded. "Yes actually. I kept his secret for him."

"His secret?" Mary leaned in a little closer, her heart began to pound.

"Mmhm. You know how hard it is for celebrities to go anywhere without being attacked by fans. He wore a hat, and stayed in the back, but I recognized him right away. When I did, he asked me not to tell anyone, because he wanted to see her perform, and he was afraid that if people knew who he was, he wouldn't be able to come back."

"Who?" Suzie's eyes widened.

"Ty Boggs." She grinned. "Right here, in this coffee shop. I guess it's okay to talk about it now, since he's probably not going to come back. He only came to see her." She looked back at the photograph. "I'm not even sure if she knew he was in the audience. I never saw her speak to him."

"What about her husband, Marcus? Did you ever see him around?" Suzie displayed a picture on her phone.

"No." She shook her head as she stared at the screen.

"How about this man?" Suzie scrolled to a picture of Shawn.

"Shawn? Sure, he was in here a lot. Nice guy." She smiled, with just enough color in her cheeks to indicate she might have a crush.

"Was he here when Cynthia was performing?" Suzie tilted her head in the direction of the stage.

"No, not that I saw, anyway. It's always busy during open mics. Oh wait, yes one time. The last time she performed I think. I brought him his coffee, but he didn't touch a sip of it. He seemed a little down, so I brought him a muffin for free. And he wouldn't even touch it." She shrugged. "I guess he didn't like her acting."

"Thanks for your help." Suzie smiled at her.

"Sure, I just hope they figure out what happened to her." She gazed at the stage. "She wasn't the nicest person, but was really

talented."

Suzie carried the muffin over to one of the tables. When they sat down, she pushed the plate towards Mary.

"This is for you."

"Aw, thanks but no thanks, Suzie."

"Mary, you need to eat." She pushed it closer.

"Okay fine, I'll share it with you."

As the two tore apart the muffin, Suzie couldn't help but look in the direction of the stage. Cynthia still had her dreams, and even though she knew that she would never be famous, she still needed to exercise them.

"Do you think she knew that Ty was there watching her?"

Mary's voice drew her from her thoughts.

"Probably, they were friends, right? It wouldn't surprise me if she asked him to come for support."

"Maybe, but he was in the back, disguised, maybe she had no idea." Mary shook her head. "It's amazing the things you learn about people after they're gone."

"Yes, it is. And sometimes it's amazing what you come across about people who are still around." Suzie thumbed through her phone for a moment as she considered whether to update Jason about this information.

She hesitated a moment, then texted him.

Have you looked into Ty?

A few minutes slipped by before he answered.

Can't say.

The text sent a shiver down her spine. Can't say? To her that meant he might have found something out that implicated Ty in the crime. Maybe she was reading too much into it, but surely if there was nothing to it he would have told her it was a dead end. Which made the fact that he was sitting in the back watching Cynthia on stage that much creepier.

A second later another text came through.

You're free to go into the house. Police tape is down, you can use your key to get in.

"Yes!" Suzie jumped up so fast that she almost knocked her coffee over. "Mary, we get to go home!"

"What?" Mary's mouth dropped open. "Now?"

"Yes, now. Jason said we can go any time, it's been released."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Mary reached down and

rubbed her ankle. “I can’t wait to get my slippers on.”

Within minutes Suzie and Mary arrived at Dune House, and Paul arrived right behind them. He’d texted Suzie that he was eager to celebrate with her. Suzie stepped out of the car and gazed up at the building. It looked the same as always, perched above the water like a mansion, but warmer, with welcoming windows and a broad wraparound porch. It was home. When she’d inherited the place from a long-lost uncle she doubted that she would ever consider it home, let alone want to spend the rest of her life in it. But it was home now. She didn’t realize how much so, until she’d been told she couldn’t stay there. She practically ran up the steps to the porch.

“Wait, wait for me!” Mary laughed as she rushed to catch up with her.

Suzie already had the key in the lock. “I wonder what kind of mess they left in here?” She opened the door, expecting the worst, but everything looked just as it did the day she left. “Wow. No mess so far.” She stepped inside, with Mary and Paul right behind her. “Oh, it’s so good to be home!” She did a slow spin as she stepped into the foyer of Dune House. “I was beginning to doubt that we would ever see this place again.”

“Now that you’re back, what are you going to do?” Paul glanced over his shoulder at the door. “Are you going to invite all of the guests back.”

“Yes, of course. If they want to come that is. But I think it’s important to get things as back to normal as we can. It may take us some time to get to the point that we can feel some relief, but familiar surroundings should help with that.”

“I’m not so sure.” Mary leaned against the door frame and peered inside. “It’s strange, even though I’m back here, it still feels

like I'm on the outside for some reason."

"You're not." Suzie grabbed her hand and tugged her inside. "You're right here, with me, where you belong."

"Maybe. But I'm not out of suspicion yet, am I? I mean, the fact that they found no evidence doesn't clear my name. It doesn't cast anyone else as the main suspect, does it?"

"Not just yet, but we're going to get to the bottom of it." Suzie skimmed the living room. "The place is awfully tidy. I expected to find it torn apart."

"I had them put everything back." Jason stepped in behind the three of them. "It took a little guidance and some overtime pay, but they made sure everything was the way they found it."

"Jason, that was kind of you." Suzie met his eyes, and noticed the tension in his expression.

"It wasn't just to save you the trouble." He pulled his hat off his head and looked at Mary. "I knew that when you had the chance you'd want to look over things in the house, and the best way to jog your memory would be to have things remain exactly as they were. I'm hoping you'll think of something, anything, that can help us with the case."

"Like where I hid the poison?" Mary stared at him as she folded her arms across her chest.

"Mary, you know I can't take sides, but I'm certain that you don't think I believe you are responsible for Cynthia's death." He met her eyes. "I don't think that, not even for a second. But I still have to do my job."

"Speaking of the case, Mary and I suspect that the person who purchased the brownies had a romantic interest. Now that we know Ryan was her brother, and not her lover, that centers the suspicion around Marcus, don't you think?" Suzie hoped the question would break the tension between the two.

"Yes, I do, and I am looking into it. However, the problem with Marcus as a suspect is that he is very talkative. I've managed to pin down that he was in conversations with people on the crew for the majority of the time that we believe Cynthia was poisoned. There's a little leeway, but it would be a very tight window. Summer said she should have the final results from the tests on the stomach contents by tomorrow morning. Then at least we may have an idea of what exact poison was used, and that paired with the brownie being the most likely food that was poisoned, could point us in the

direction of the murderer. I hope at least."

"Good." Suzie sighed. "Hopefully there will be a record of someone buying the poison."

"We shall see." He glanced over at Mary again. "Anything you can think of, anything you noticed, I'm all ears."

"I know." Mary lowered her eyes. "I wish I could remember more."

"We'll figure it out, Mary." Suzie cast her a bright smile, but the tension had returned.

"Paul." Jason offered him his hand. "I'll talk with you later."

"Yes, let me know if there's anything I can do to help." He shook Jason's hand, before Jason headed out through the door. "I should be going, too. I need to pick up some supplies." Paul gave Suzie a quick kiss before he walked out after Jason.

"Ugh, I shouldn't have been so cold to him." Mary sighed. "I just don't feel like myself right now."

"It's okay to turn a cold shoulder to the person who can put you in handcuffs. Trust me, I've done it plenty of times." She winked at her friend. "Don't let it get to you, Mary. We're back home, the results are coming in tomorrow, and we're this close to figuring out who did this." She held her fingertips an inch apart.

"Hm." Mary spread her fingers out a bit wider. "Maybe this close."

"Yes, maybe." Suzie grinned. "But soon we'll be this close." She squished her fingertips together.

"I hope so." Mary walked through the kitchen and put a few things back in their places. "I have to admit, they did a very good job of putting everything back. I want to look through all of the rooms and make sure that everything is in place for when the guests return." Mary started up the stairs. Suzie followed after her.

"If they come back." Suzie frowned. "I'm not sure that any will. Like the barista at the coffee shop said, the thought of Cynthia being murdered here might be too uncomfortable for them to move back in."

"Well, hopefully at least a few will." Mary stepped into the first guest room. It was still spotless, but she made sure the pillow was fluffed and the bedspread was smooth.

"I'll help you." Suzie stepped in after her. They went room by room, checking each one over, and wiping up leftover fingerprint dust. "We should make sure to thank Jason for all of this extra

effort. They didn't have to put everything back this way."

"No, they didn't." Mary paused outside of Ty's room. "I wonder if he'll come back? What do you think?"

"I'm not sure. I know he values his privacy, and we can give that to him here, but if the story ever breaks on national news, then we might not be able to."

"As long as Preston and Drake continue to protect the location we should be okay."

"Hopefully they will."

Mary began to look over the room, then something caught her eye. "What's this?" Mary crouched down behind the bed. "There's something down here, wedged between the frame and the wall."

"Let me see." Suzie crouched down on the other side of the bed. "It's shiny." She reached out to see if she could grab it.

"Can you get it?" Mary called out from the other side of the bed.

"No, it's stuck." She sighed and stood up again. "Let's move the bed. Can you get that side?"

"Yes." Mary grabbed her end and braced herself. "Ready?"

"Ready." Suzie nodded, then lifted and slid.

Mary did the same, and soon the bed was a few inches away from the wall. As Mary rubbed her knee, Suzie reached behind the bed and grabbed the silver cylinder.

"How strange." She held it up for Mary to see.

"Oh, that's just Ty's toothbrush." Mary waved her hand. "I guess the police overlooked it since it was stuck back there."

"His toothbrush? Gross." Suzie tossed it over to Mary. But Mary's attention was caught by the sound of someone outside. The cylinder sailed right past her and landed on the floor with a thud. The top and bottom half cracked open, and a small bottle rolled across the floor.

"Oh my!" Mary jumped, then peered at the bottle. "What is that?"

"It's not a toothbrush." Suzie rushed over to take a look.

"It looks like a bottle of oil." Mary reached down to pick up the bottle.

"Mary, don't!" Suzie grabbed her hand just before she could touch it.

"What? Why?" She looked over at her friend.

"Why would he tell you it was a toothbrush if it wasn't?" She stared at her.

“I don’t know. You’re right. Maybe it’s oil of oregano, some people use that for toothaches.”

“Maybe, or it could be poison.”

“What?” Mary gasped. “You really think so?”

“I think it’s a possibility.” She narrowed her eyes. “We should call Jason and report this. Obviously, the police missed it.”

“Yes, we should.” Mary looked towards the window again. “But first I want to know what is going on outside.” She stepped closer to the window. A group of photographers and reporters were gathered around the entrance of Dune House. “Uh oh, Suzie, I think we have a problem. I don’t think the location of Cynthia’s murder is a secret anymore.”

“What is it?” Suzie joined her at the window. “Oh no. We’d better go make sure the front is locked up, I don’t want any photographs of the interior ending up associated with this.”

“All right I’ll check the front, you take care of the back.” Mary headed for the door. Suzie followed after her. By the time they reached the ground floor, there were cameras at the windows, and sirens in the distance.

“It sounds like Jason is already on his way. Stay away from the windows, Mary.”

“I will.”

As they locked up all of the entrances, more camera crews arrived. Suzie’s cell phone rang. When she saw it was Paul she answered it.

“Hey Paul, it’s crazy over here.”

“Yes, I noticed. I was trying to get close.”

“Don’t bother, Jason will have them all cleared out in just a few minutes.”

“Suzie, did you leave the back door open?” Mary joined her near the front of the house.

“No. Why? Was it open? I have to go, Paul, I’ll call you back when all of this settles down.” She hung up the phone and turned to Mary.

“Yes, it was open.” Mary sighed. “I guess that one of those photographers got a few snapshots while we were upstairs.”

“That’s odd.” Suzie frowned. “Here comes Jason.” She pulled open the door for him, then closed and locked it behind him. “What’s going on? How did word get out?”

“I’m afraid someone at Parish PD might have leaked the

information. We're still investigating, but it doesn't matter now, the word is out. I'm not sure that you two will enjoy staying here with all of this craziness."

"Do they know that Ty and the rest of the crew are staying at the motel?" She crossed her arms.

"No, there haven't been any reporters there, so I think it's best if they stay there."

"Yes, unfortunately I agree." She sighed. "Well, at least we're back home." The thought reminded her of what they found upstairs. "Jason, I think your investigators missed something. We found a cylinder wedged behind Ty's bed, and it had a small bottle of liquid in it. I thought it could possibly be the poison you were looking for."

"You did?" He charged up the stairs. "Where is it?"

Suzie and Mary followed after him. "Just inside the first room on the floor. I wouldn't let Mary touch it because I wasn't sure what was inside."

"Where?" He paused in the doorway.

"Just there, on the floor." Mary leaned past him to point it out, but there was nothing to point at. "What? It was right there." She stepped further into the room.

Suzie dropped down on her knees and peered under the bed. "It didn't roll under here."

"I don't understand, it was there just a second ago." Mary shook her head. "Maybe we kicked it on the way out?" She walked around the perimeter of the room in search of the bottle.

"No, it's gone." Suzie pursed her lips. "Someone came in here and took it." She spun on Jason. "It must have been one of the reporters! Whoever came in the back door."

"Now wait a second, why would a reporter steal something like that?" Jason gazed hard at the floor, when he looked up again, his face was flushed. "There's only one person that would want to steal it, if it was the poison. That would be the killer."

"The cylinder belonged to Ty, I know it did. I found it when I was cleaning his room, and he told me it was a toothbrush holder. How could I be so stupid?"

Mary groaned as she looked away.

"Mary, don't be silly. There's no way that you could have known what it was. Ty is the killer?" Suzie's eyes widened.

"I still have a hard time believing that."

“It doesn’t matter what we believe, if that poison was here, then he’s the killer.” Suzie walked back over to Jason. “You need to go pick him up.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.” Jason’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the room again. “I have nothing to arrest him for. No evidence. If it was poison that you found, then he is most likely the killer, but the poison is gone. I have no way to prove it was ever here, or even that it was poison. I will go talk to him though.” He looked between the two of them. “Not a word about what you found here. If he is the killer, I don’t want him to think anyone suspects him. Got it?”

“Yes.” Suzie still gazed at the empty floor. “I can’t believe we let it disappear.”

“It’s better that it disappeared than that you or Mary were put at risk.” He patted her shoulder. “I’ll see what I can find out from Ty.” As he spoke Ty’s name, Suzie noticed a twitch in his expression. She couldn’t place what it meant, but she knew that it meant something.

“Jason, is everything all right?”

“Sure, fine. It’s just that he’s hired a lawyer, and getting through to him is proving to be quite difficult. Don’t worry though, I will question him, it just may take some time.”

As he left Dune House he cleared away the reporters, but Suzie knew that it would only be a matter of time before they returned. It was too good of a story for them not to come back.

“Suzie, do you mind if I go out for a bit?”

“No, of course not. Where are you going?” She walked with her out on to the porch.

“I’ll let you know. I just want to look into something.” Mary gave her a quick hug. “I’ll be back soon.”

“All right, be cautious. This place is going to be crawling with reporters, and some will do anything to get a story.”

“I will be.” She met her friend’s eyes and held them for a long moment. It meant the world to her that Suzie never once doubted her. But she couldn’t let the suspicion that surrounded her become a blemish on the reputation of Dune House.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 13

Mary drove towards the motel without a complete plan in mind. As she parked outside, she wished she could call Wes for advice. She was sure that he would know how to get Ty to talk. But he was out of reach, perhaps not just because of the case. As she fiddled with her phone, her stomach flipped with uncertainty. Why, if he doubted her, would she ever want to be with him?

When her phone rang, she jumped so suddenly that she struck her knee on the steering wheel and nearly dropped her phone. As she grabbed it her fingertip slid across the screen. A few colorful words slipped past in the process.

"Mary?"

Wes' voice drifting from the phone silenced her. Had he heard all of that? She blushed as she placed the phone to her ear.

"Sorry Wes, I dropped the phone."

"That's all right. You're not driving, are you?"

"No, I'm parked." She relaxed some as she listened to him speak. It was good to hear his voice.

"I just wanted to check in with you. I know I haven't been around much, and I'm sorry about that. This case is pretty complicated, but I think I'm getting close to the truth."

"I'm glad to hear that. And, it's good to hear from you."

"Are you back at Dune House? I heard it's been cleared."

"No, not at the moment I'm not. I'm at the motel."

"What are you doing there?" His tone shifted from relaxed and warm to tight and stern.

"I was just going to check in with some of the guests."

"Don't. I don't want you anywhere near that motel."

"Why?" Her heart began to pound. What did he know that she didn't?

“I can’t tell you, but I need you to listen to me. Stay away from that motel.”

“I need this murder to be solved, Wes, just like you have to do what you have to do, I have to do what I have to do. I’ll touch base with you later.” She hung up before he could argue with her. She didn’t want to be talked out of being involved in the case. It was her reputation, her life that hung in the balance, and she wasn’t going to risk it just because Wes felt overprotective of her.

After she entered the lobby she headed straight for Ty’s room. He might not talk to Jason, but she hoped he would talk to her. After a few light knocks, Ty opened the door.

“Mary.” He gestured for her to step in.

“Hi Ty.” She searched his expression as he closed the door. “I’ve been hearing some rumors, and I was hoping you could put them to rest.”

“Rumors?” He brushed his hand back through his hair. “What rumors?”

“Just that you and Cynthia might have been more than friends.” She raised her hands, palm out. “I’m not here to judge, Ty. But, I don’t like to hear lies being passed around.”

“Oh Mary, don’t think twice about it. Any time I work with a woman, those rumors spread. It’s ridiculous, and now with the press in the area it’s going to get even worse. Yes, I cared about Cynthia, she was my friend. But she was also married.”

“So, you two were never?” She hesitated to finish the question.

“Mary, you’re blushing.” He laughed. “No. Never.”

“I’m sorry that I asked, I hope I didn’t offend you.”

“Not at all.” He waved his hand.

Although he protested the very idea of romance between himself and Cynthia something about his tone still left her wondering. Why would he hide out in the back of a coffee shop to watch Cynthia if he wasn’t interested in her? Perhaps it was a crush that he didn’t want to reveal? She realized he was talking to her after he’d already launched into a new subject.

“I’m going to host a small memorial for Cynthia. I know that it may be difficult for you, but I’d like it if both you and Suzie were there.” He leaned close to her. “It’s going to be short, not much to speak of, but I think it’s important that we honor her. I know that as soon as Preston gets the go ahead he’s going to want to start filming full force. I’m just afraid that Cynthia’s memory is going to

get lost in the rush. You know?"

"Yes." She nodded as she studied him. "I think it's very sweet of you to want to do that. I hope that over time the pain you're experiencing lessens."

"I think it will." He rubbed her arm for a moment. "Can I count on you to be there?"

"I'm not sure it's a good idea. I wouldn't want to upset anyone." She frowned as she took a step away from him. "The night should be about Cynthia and it might be hard for people to focus on that if they are looking at me as a suspect. Don't you think?"

"No." He reached for her arm again and held it firmly this time. "I don't think that at all. I think that you should show your face, because you have suffered just as much as the rest of us, perhaps more, since you've been faced with the daunting possibility of going to prison. Why should Marcus be there, free as a bird, when we both know that he should be locked up. Maybe if you show up, it'll shake him up a little bit. I can't stand the thought of him being there, but it wouldn't look right if I didn't invite him."

"Ty, we don't really know that. I mean, I have my suspicions, as do you, but that doesn't make him a murderer. If he did it, there would be evidence, something to prove it. If we're wrong, then we're thinking terrible thoughts about a man who just lost the love of his life."

"The love of his life?" He rolled his eyes. "That man was obsessed with her. Honestly, he still is, even though she's gone. He's not going to let her go, not as long as he can keep riding her coattails to get attention."

"Ty, maybe you should take a moment and consider what you're saying. Yes, Marcus does seem obsessive, but she was also his wife. He wanted to make things work. Now he's grieving her loss. Yes, it's possible that he killed her, but it's just as possible that it could have been someone else."

"Like who?" He shrugged. "Shawn?"

"Maybe. I haven't ruled him out, that's for sure. Why are you so certain it was Marcus?"

"Because he knew." He narrowed his eyes.

"He knew what?" Mary didn't realize that she'd been backing up until her shoulders struck the door.

"That she was having an affair." His expression darkened. "I didn't want to say too much, because I don't want her reputation to

be even more harmed by all of this. But, she was cheating on him again. She was my friend, and I don't want it to be splashed all over the news that she was dishonest, that she couldn't be faithful. Is that so much to ask?"

"No, it's not." Her heart softened at the pain in his voice. "She was lucky to have you."

"Maybe." He shook his head. "I wish I had warned her to be careful around him. But I just never thought he would go through with it. Anyway." He took a deep breath, then locked his eyes to hers. "You'll be there tomorrow night?"

"Yes. I'll be there."

"Great." He gave her shoulder a squeeze. "And don't forget, Suzie should be there, too. You should both come early, come by here first, and I can run the service by you."

"I'll make sure we do." As she left the motel, she wondered where Marcus was. Had he fled? Was he holed up in one of the motel rooms? She shivered at the thought of him being anywhere in Garber.

Suzie had just set out two plates when Mary stepped through the door.

"Hi there. I made a quick quiche for dinner. I hope you're hungry."

"Yes, I am." She flopped down in an empty chair. "And that smells delicious."

"I just hope it's edible." Suzie laughed. "So, spill. What did you really run off to do?"

"I just spoke with Ty, and he said that he's having a memorial for Cynthia tomorrow night. He wants us to meet him beforehand to go over some things."

"What things?" Suzie raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not sure. Maybe he wants our help setting up.” Mary set her purse down on the table and breathed a sigh of relief. It still felt good to be coming home to Dune House instead of the motel.

“Maybe.” Suzie frowned as she looked over at her.

“I think it’s sweet that he’s trying to honor her. It’s better than just doing nothing about her death, I mean, with the lack of evidence to convict Marcus, she may never get her justice. At least this way, she’s being acknowledged. Her family will have a funeral of course, but this is where she lost her life. It seems fitting that he should want to honor her here as well.”

“Marcus? You think it’s him now?”

“Yes I think so, especially after what Ty just told me. I don’t know with who, but apparently Cynthia was definitely having an affair. Marcus must have found out and decided to kill her.”

“The pieces do seem to fit. But Ty couldn’t tell you who the affair was with?”

“No, he was pretty guarded about it. He seemed to want to protect her reputation.”

“That is sweet of him. I guess we can come up with something. And honestly, Mary this might be the perfect time to take one last shot at the killer. I’m sure Marcus will be there for the memorial.” She snapped her fingers. “Yes, this is perfect. I’m not sure how yet, but I think we can do something to shake him up.”

“Or ruin a memorial service?” Mary gritted her teeth. “Not exactly the best way to recover our reputation.”

“No, it’s not. But we will try to keep things under control, and we can’t let someone get away with murder.”

“You’re right.” Mary slumped down in the chair and closed her eyes. When she opened them, Suzie had placed a slice of quiche on her plate. “Mm, thank you.”

“Eat up. We’re going to need our strength.”

As Suzie dug her fork through the fluff of cheese on her plate she tried to picture Marcus as a killer. He certainly seemed to be emotionally unstable, though not quite as angry as Shawn. However, did that make him a killer? He had the motive, and the opportunity. If his wife was cheating on him, of course he’d want revenge. But to kill her? That seemed like a huge leap from the way he spoke about her. He seemed to truly love her. But could love get so twisted that he thought no one else deserved to have her?

She and Mary spent the evening reviewing the case and debating

ways that they could prove if Marcus was guilty. By the time they both headed for bed, they had an idea of what to do. Suzie could only hope that it would work.

Mary crawled into her own bed, and savored the soft hug it gave her body. As she closed her eyes she thought of the missing bottle in Ty's room. Who had taken it, and why? If it was a reporter she guessed she would hear about it on the news the next day. Or maybe they realized it was something useless, just a bottle of oil or ointment, that had nothing to do with the case. It made her uneasy to think that someone had been in Dune House without her knowing it. But she knew that some reporters would go to any lengths to get a story. She hoped that she wouldn't be that story. It was hard for her to sleep when she imagined the headline splashed across national newspapers. Would they give her a nickname? She shook away the thought. No, she was innocent, and if the plan worked, soon the murderer would be in prison. She thought of Wes, who she'd never checked in with, and wondered whether things would ever be the same between them.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 14

Early the next morning Suzie headed out to hunt down Jason. She wanted to go over a few things with him. However, he was harder to find than she expected. After calling him, and stopping by the station in an attempt to track him down, she decided to do things the old-fashioned way, and drove up and down the quiet streets of Garber. Finally, she spotted it, Jason's patrol car tucked behind some bushes near the old bank. It wasn't occupied anymore, which made it a good hiding place. She guessed he was either napping or setting a speed trap, but when she rapped on his window she realized he wasn't doing either. He had his computer on his lap and the glimpse she caught of the screen revealed that he'd been looking up information about Shawn.

"Suzie!" He looked over at her with surprise. "You shouldn't sneak up on me like that."

"And you shouldn't be so hard to find." She raised an eyebrow.

He stepped out of the car, the door made a loud slam as he closed it.

"Sorry, I missed your call." He flipped his phone from one hand to the other. "I've been trying to find something, anything solid about Cynthia's murder. Why were you trying to find me? Something new?" He looked at her with hope in his eyes.

"Not exactly. Ty is planning a memorial service for Cynthia. I'd guess it would be best if you were there." Suzie did her best to keep her face aligned in a neutral expression. Jason did his best to avoid meeting her eyes.

"You think so?" He squinted at the sun, then glanced at her. "Why is that? Are you planning something?"

She stared at him, slightly surprised. Yes, he was her cousin, they had grown close since she moved into town and turned Dune

House into a bed and breakfast, but she hadn't realized that he'd come to know her so well.

"Not exactly." She cleared her throat. "I just think it would be good. If Marcus and Shawn are both going to be there, fireworks are possible."

"Yes, that's true." He rubbed his chin. "I know about the incident in the lobby. I guess that those two might try to go at it again. You wouldn't do anything to encourage that, would you?"

"I just want the truth to come out, Jason, that's all."

He scuffed his shoe against the pavement and offered a quick look in her direction.

"You're still upset with me, aren't you?"

"The way that Kirk went after Mary, Jason." She frowned.

"I know, I know. But it had to be that way. How would it look if we took it easy on our best suspect?" He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Trust me, it was the last thing I wanted to do, but it wasn't just me involved. With Parish PD breathing down my neck I had to be careful. And, I know Kirk went a little overboard, but to be honest, if it had been any other suspect, I would have told him he did a great job. So why would I send him mixed messages?" He furrowed a brow as he studied her. "Do you think she'll forgive me?"

"Mary?" She laughed and shook her head. "Mary's already forgiven you. She's the forgiving type. But that doesn't mean you're off the hook."

"Great." He sighed and looked back up at the sky. "So, what will get me off the hook?"

"Finding Cynthia's killer. It's the only definite way to clear Mary's name. As long as the killer is still out there, the question will constantly hang over our heads, over Dune House's reputation. People will still think it's possible that somehow Cynthia's death was our fault."

"I'm trying, Suzie. It's not like I don't want the same thing." His expression grew grim for a moment. "The problem is, the window is so small. The owner of the brownie shop can't identify who purchased the brownies. So here we are, with zero leads, and two promising suspects. I've interviewed Shawn and Marcus multiple times, as well as everyone else on set. Even Ty has made himself available as often as I need. But I can't seem to find that one clue that is going to lead us to the truth. I can't begin to tell you how

frustrated I am about it."

"Does Summer know what type of poison was used?"

"Yes, it is odorless and tasteless, but hard to find. You'd have to buy it illegally or work in pest control to get it. She said it's possible that the brownies were laced with poison, but she wasn't able to confirm that. There was no evidence of any poison at the brownie shop."

"So, it wasn't anything that could just be picked up off the shelf?" Suzie shook her head. "That makes it a bit easier, doesn't it?"

"I have the boys back at the station scouring the financial history of everyone that had contact with Cynthia. Hopefully something will pop as the purchase of the poison."

"Good. So, you'll be there this evening?"

"Yes, of course." He studied her for a moment. "I guess even if I tell you not to do whatever you are planning you still will."

"You do know me too well."

"Are you going to tell me your plan?"

"Not just yet." She smiled at him. "But believe me, you'll know it when you see it."

"Great. I think I might need backup." He raised an eyebrow.

"You might." Her voice wavered in a serious tone.

Mary prepared coffee for herself and Suzie, before she realized that Suzie's purse and keys were gone. "Where did you go so early?" She rubbed the curve of her shoulder and eased her way down into a chair. It was impossible not to be curious about what she might be doing or looking into. But she had to admit that sitting in a warm safe place with fresh coffee was a nice place to be. However, just as she was about to take her first sip there was a knock on the door. She wasn't sure who it could be. Last night she and Suzie had gone

down the list of guests and warned them that coming back to Dune House might not be a good idea. She walked over to the door and peeked out through the window along the side of it.

"Ryan!" When she opened the door, he smiled, just a little.

"Sorry to bother you, Mary."

"It's no bother." She studied him. "What do you need?"

"I just wanted to thank you. I've been keeping my secret to myself, and it was nice to have someone else to talk to about it."

"You're welcome, Ryan. Are you going to be at the memorial tonight?"

"What memorial?" Ryan stared at her with wide eyes. "I didn't hear anything about that."

"You didn't?" Mary frowned. "I'm not sure how Ty could have missed contacting you. It's at six-thirty tonight."

"No, I didn't hear a word about it. Why would he leave me out of it?" He narrowed his eyes. "I know I'm a nobody to him, but I mattered to Cynthia."

"Of course you did." Mary surprised herself as she reached out to stroke his cheek. Something about Ryan reminded her of her own son. Perhaps it was the bond between him and his sister. Her children were like that as well. They would always look out for each other. Unfortunately, Ryan could no longer do that for his sister. "More than you will ever know. It must have meant so much to you that she brought you on to the set."

"It did. But now, all I can think is that maybe if I hadn't needed her help, maybe she wouldn't have even taken the job. Maybe she'd still be alive." He reached up to wipe a tear away before it could trail along his cheek. "She didn't need to be here, I did, and maybe if I didn't, everything would be different."

"Don't do that to yourself, Ryan." She clucked her tongue lightly and patted his shoulder. "There is no way that you could have known about any of this. There was no way for you to prevent what happened. Unfortunately, someone terrible did a terrible thing, and now, yes you have to live with the consequences of that for the rest of your life. But you can also know, that your sister loved you, very much. She tried to make things right between you. Even though that might not have been enough, I do hope that you'll find it in your heart to forgive her."

"I do." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I forgave her the moment she came back into my life. But I never had the chance to

tell her that. I'm not sure that she knew it. I think maybe she was still trying to make things up to me." He shook his head. "She had such a hard life, and then this is how it ends. Killed by her husband."

"We don't know that for sure, yet." Mary tucked her hands into her pockets as she considered his words. It was easy to assume that Marcus was the killer. He had good reason if he suspected that Cynthia was having another affair. It would be at least the second time she cheated on him, and with his temper, Mary could easily imagine him going after her. But poisoning wasn't an act of rage. It was an act of pre-meditation. One that she wasn't sure Marcus was capable of.

"No, maybe not. But someone did it." He shook his head. "I wish there was a way that I could help her, even now, I feel useless."

"You're not useless, Ryan. You should take the hope she had for you, and make it happen. Hmm?"

"Yes." He sighed as he leaned against the doorway. "I will try. Thanks for telling me about the memorial. I guess I'll see you there."

"Bye Ryan." She waved to him as he walked down the steps into the parking lot. Suzie walked past him, with a brief greeting, then continued straight towards Mary.

"Good morning, Mary."

"Good morning, well almost afternoon now. I can make a fresh pot of coffee if you would like?"

"No thanks, Brad's Brownies should be open by now. I think we should go talk to Brad before it gets too late."

"Okay, let me grab my things." When Mary returned, Suzie was already headed for the car. Mary could see the determination in Suzie's strides. She knew that she was a woman on a mission, and she would do anything to catch Cynthia's killer.

On the drive to Brad's Brownies they discussed their plan again.

"All of this hinges on Brad's cooperation. If he won't do it, then we can't do it. I need it to be exactly the same." Suzie tightened her grip on the steering wheel. Her nerves were on edge.

"I think it's a great idea, Suzie. Let's see if we can make it happen." Mary stepped out of the car and headed in the direction of the gifts and goodies shop. Brad did a brisk business during the spring and summer months, as most people loved the fact that the boxes the brownies came in doubled as souvenirs. Each one featured a photograph of a picturesque area in Garber, mostly featuring the beach, but some of the nearby woods, along with the town's name. The box was made of a thin wood and the brownies were wrapped to protect them and prevent them from leaving smudges on the box.

"He's closed." Suzie groaned as she stared at the sign in the window.

"Knock anyway. Maybe he's just doing some work in the back." Mary gestured to the glass door.

Suzie knocked hard several times. After a few minutes, a light flicked on in the main area of the shop, and Brad made his way to the door.

"What's the trouble?" He opened the door slightly and stared wide-eyed from Suzie to Mary.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Brad, but we need to ask you a favor." Suzie locked eyes with him. "It's going to sound strange, but please, I need you to consider doing it for us."

"What is it?" He pushed open the door and invited them inside. "You two look so upset, what's going on?"

"We believe that someone poisoned the brownies that were ordered from your shop, Brad. We think that's how Cynthia was killed." Suzie let the revelation fall between them, as she knew it would come as a shock.

"But my shop was searched and nothing was found."

"We think they poisoned it after they had bought it."

"That's horrible! Do the police know? Are they going to shut down my shop again?" His eyes fluttered as multiple emotions flashed across his face.

"The police can't prove anything at the moment, I'm afraid, and no your shop won't be in any trouble. But I thought of a plan that might just help us catch the killer. We're going to need your help."

She studied him.

“Sure, anything to solve the murder. What is it?”

“I’ll need several orders of your two pieces of brownie boxes. I would like about thirty. That should cover it, and I need them by tonight.”

“By tonight?” He stared at her. “That’s quite a big task. I’m not sure if I can have it ready in time.”

“We’ll help.” Suzie kept her gaze on him. “I believe that only the killer knows what he poisoned, and it will throw him off to see these boxes at the memorial. I’m hoping that he will do something to reveal himself, or perhaps even hesitate to eat the brownies.”

“That’s a big hope.” He frowned. “I’ll do it. I won’t need any help, thank you though. I can have it ready by six, when I close. My wife gets cross if I’m not home in time for dinner. Would you like me to deliver them on my way home?”

“Yes please, that would be perfect, the memorial starts at six-thirty.” Suzie nodded to him. After giving him the delivery details, she and Mary left the shop. Suzie hoped the plan would work. It would rely on the initial shock of the murderer seeing a box of brownies that was the same as the one he’d poisoned, out there in the open. He would know then, that they knew, and that might stir enough fear to be recognizable on his face. Would it be Marcus?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 15

Over the next few hours Suzie and Mary went over every detail of their plan. Then Suzie decided to check in with Jason. However, her calls went straight to voicemail.

“He must be in the middle of something.” She hung up the phone and looked at Mary. “Are we ready for this?”

“Yes. We should get going. Ty wanted us there a little early. We have to make sure that we are at the memorial by six so we don’t miss the brownies being delivered.” Mary smoothed down the milk-white collar of her flower-print dress. It was suitable for a memorial, with just enough color to indicate a sense of celebration of life. In contrast, Suzie’s black dress seemed drab. She tugged at the skirt and smoothed it down.

“Maybe I should change.”

“Is there time?” Mary glanced at her watch.

“No, there’s really not. Let’s just go. We don’t want to delay anything. As long as this is perfectly timed it will all go smoothly.” Suzie straightened her skirt one last time then snatched up her purse, and a flower on a pin and put it in her pocket. She would pin the pink flower to her dress before the memorial.

“Are you sure about this, Suzie? What if we’re wrong? What if the killer isn’t even at the memorial?” Mary’s eyes creased with concern. “I mean it seems a little twisted to serve the very food that killed Cynthia at her memorial.”

“Then we’ve blown it. But this is our last chance, Mary. This is the only thing that we can do to try to solve the murder.”

“All right, let’s go then.” Mary grabbed her purse, and her keys. “I’ll drive.”

As Suzie followed her out the door of Dune House, it was hard for her not to think about the last time she’d seen Cynthia there.

She was a sweet woman underneath, she guessed. But she hadn't shown it during her stay there, and her treatment of Mary had made all of Suzie's protective instincts ramp up. She'd wished ill will on the woman. She'd given her a tongue-lashing in the safety of her own mind, and now she was going to her memorial. It did feel wrong.

They sat in silence on the way to the motel. Mary focused on driving. When she neared the parking lot, she glanced over at Suzie.

"It's nice of Ty to arrange this. Don't you think?"

"I do." Suzie hesitated. "But what about the cylinder we found?"

"What about it?" She shrugged. "It probably had nothing to do with the case."

"Then why would someone take it." Suzie narrowed her eyes. "It seems so odd."

"I'm guessing it was one of the reporters. Maybe they thought it had something to do with the murder, or maybe they knew that it belonged to Ty. If so then it will end up on the internet for some astronomical price." She parked in front of the motel.

"Yes, I guess you're right."

When they reached Ty's room, he answered the door after the first knock. He was dressed in a three-piece suit which was a combination of rich black, and deep maroon. His hair was combed, and he was clean-shaven. It seemed to Suzie as if he'd made quite an effort to look nice for the memorial.

"Ladies, I'm so glad that you could make it. Come in, please." He held the door open for them as they stepped inside.

"Where is everyone else?" Suzie paused a few steps past the door.

"Oh, they'll be along." He pulled the door shut behind Mary. "I thought it would be good for the three of us to have a moment to talk about the memorial."

"We can talk after." Suzie's heart began to pound. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something did not feel right. "We should be going, we have some things to do before the service." She gazed at him for a long moment. Something about his demeanor was off. His smile was lopsided, and his body language was tight, controlled. She recalled Mary telling her about Ryan's insistence that he knew nothing about the memorial. Jason didn't either, until she told him. Who exactly had Ty invited if he left out the victim's brother and the local police?

“Oh, please don’t rush off. I just want to make sure that everything goes off without a hitch. I don’t want anyone losing their temper. I’m certain that Marcus will go after Shawn again. That’s why I have this.” He pulled something out of his pocket. It was small, metal, and odd looking.

“Is that a taser?” Mary stepped forward, and as she did, Suzie moved closer to her. “Why do you have that?”

“It just causes a small disabling shock. If Shawn gets out of control, then I’ll be able to stop him before things get messy. Or maybe I’ll use it on Marcus, to get him to confess.” He laughed, an awkward laugh, that left Suzie even more confused. “It doesn’t hurt much at all, do you want to try it?” He jabbed it in Mary’s direction.

Mary lunged back before the taser could make contact. Suzie stepped in front of her and glared at Ty.

“Are you drunk?”

“Maybe.” He shrugged.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Ty. Jason will be there. He’ll be able to handle Marcus if he loses it. Just leave that here, all right?”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.” He gripped the taser a little tighter. “Ladies, I’m not sure that you will understand this, but some things just have to be done.”

“Things? If Shawn is guilty then he will have his trial and we will get to the bottom of everything that happened. But you can’t take justice into your own hands.” Suzie narrowed her eyes. “Leave it here, or I’m going to tell Jason about it. He won’t want any other weapons there.”

“Will you now?” He chuckled, and a strange light entered his eyes. It took her breath away to see it. “Are you going to tell on me, Suzie?”

“Mary, open the door.” Suzie took a step back.

“Go on, Mary, open the door.” Ty winked at her as she reached for the knob. When she twisted the handle, it wouldn’t budge.

“I can’t, it’s locked.” Mary jiggled the knob but it wouldn’t give.

“It can’t be locked on the inside.” Suzie turned to face her, and in that moment she saw that the door handle was not like the rest of the handles in the motel. It had a keyhole on the inside.

“I asked the manager of the motel to replace it for me. You see, I became a little particular about my room. I decided that I would like to be able to lock it from the inside and the outside. It’s funny,

some people would find that strange, but when you have enough money, they'll do anything to please you. Have a seat, ladies." He gestured to two wooden chairs near a small table.

"No, thanks." Suzie narrowed her eyes. "We need to leave or we'll miss the memorial. If we don't show up, then what will people think?"

"A memorial for that harlot?" He laughed and pointed to the chairs again, then waved the taser "Let's just get along, I don't want to have to leave any marks. There's nothing to miss. There is no memorial. No one will be looking for you."

Mary grabbed Suzie's hand as her heart pounded. "Let us go, Ty, you have no reason to keep us here. Whatever you did, your fame, your money, it can get you out of it. But not if you add two bodies to the list."

"I have every reason to keep you here!" The anger in his voice was evident as it bounced off the walls of the room. "Sit down!" He thrust the taser towards Mary's neck, but did not touch it to her skin. Mary sank down in one of the chairs, Suzie dropped down into the other.

"I had it planned out well, I thought. Everything was coming together perfectly, I poisoned her shortly after lunch. We went somewhere near the set by ourselves and pretended that we were going to rehearse my lines. It all worked perfectly. But then the police shut down Dune House before I could get back into my room. I tried to get to my room before you two were allowed back in, but I wasn't fast enough. So, you found my stash. And it was then I knew, you two would figure it out eventually. I managed to get the bottle back, but I knew that wouldn't help in the long run." He paced back and forth for a few moments, then turned to look at them. "I never saw this plot twist in my life. I never saw myself becoming a murderer, but when it happened, it was as if I finally stepped into my greatest role. I became, me. Understand?" He laughed. "It was beautiful."

"Ty, what did you do?" Mary's voice was soft as she spoke, but Suzie could detect the hardness underneath. She was determined to get through to Ty, even if it meant pretending to be kind. "Whatever it is, Suzie and I can help you."

"No, you can't." He paused in front of them. "Have you ever been in love, either of you?"

"I was married…"

“I didn’t ask that. I asked you if you’d ever been in love. That maddening, addictive kind of love that takes your breath away?” He looked between them.

“No.” Mary finally answered, and shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Maybe once.” Suzie bit into her bottom lip.

“You would know if you were. I never believed it was possible, until Cynthia. She became like the air to me, like I needed to be near her in order to breathe.” He took a long slow breath. “I thought, my life was going to change. Finally, I was going to be the lucky one. But she didn’t agree. She told me she wanted to break things off, that she wanted to work it out with Marcus. Can you believe that nonsense?” He chuckled. “That man is barely more than a potato, but she felt as if she owed him, for staying by her side after everything that happened with Shawn. Ridiculous. I needed her. I had to have her.”

“So, you killed her?” Mary broke in with a soft gasp. “Because she wouldn’t be with you?”

“Honestly, I wasn’t sure if I could go through with it. It seemed so Romeo and Juliet to me, you know? Just a bit too dramatic. But, I thought, we could go out together. She’d take a bite, then I’d take a bite, and it would all be over. We’d be together, forever.” He closed his eyes, but just for a moment.

“But you’re still here.” Suzie stared at him as her heart slammed against her chest. “You didn’t take that bite.”

“No. I didn’t. It turns out, I don’t really want to die. And, it’s funny, when she ate that brownie, like it was nothing, like she had no idea that it was the last bite she’d ever take, it turned me off. I guess I expected her to be smarter, or more intuitive or something. But instead, she popped that hunk of sugar in her mouth and sucked it down without a second thought. She didn’t even notice the poison. All of a sudden I realized, she wasn’t this magical being that had been brought into my life, she was just a woman, a soon to be dead woman at that point.” He shrugged. “So, I let her eat the other piece, too.”

“You could have gotten her help.” Mary’s eyes widened. “They might have been able to save her!”

“No, I would have had to admit what I’d done, and of course, I couldn’t do that.” He glanced at his watch. “Oops, it’s time for my debut.” He winked at both of them. “I’m sure there will be plenty of

cameras around to capture the moment that I offer a heartfelt speech about the great loss of my friend, Cynthia, and just how heartbroken I am. Every reporter in town will be there, I made sure to get their attention. I should be fielding movie offers by later tonight. I guess that's something to celebrate." He straightened his tie. "You two sit tight, I'll deal with you when I get back."

As he stepped through the door Suzie thought about lunging for him. She thought perhaps she could wrestle him to the ground, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized that it was not a wise move. If she gave Ty a reason to believe that they would be troublesome then he might just decide to kill them right then. Maybe, he expected them to attack and that would launch him into his murderous spree. Instead, she remained still and silent until she heard the door close and lock. There was no way out. The windows were reinforced glass and bolted. It should have been illegal, considering fire safety. Maybe he'd made that request of the motel as well. Maybe he'd ensured that the room would be turned into a cage, as he suspected he might need it. Suddenly, the door swung open again, and Ty stepped back inside. He slammed the door shut and walked towards them.

"So sorry, I think I need a little extra reassurance that you two are not going to cause me any more trouble." He pulled out two lengths of rope and began tying Mary down to a chair. "Don't." He shot a look in Suzie's direction. "If you take one step towards me, I will inject her with the same poison I killed Cynthia with. It works much faster when injected."

"You wouldn't." Suzie stared at him. "You're bluffing!"

"Do you want to find out?" He tightened the ropes enough that Mary had to hold back a groan.

"It's okay, Suzie." She breathed past the pain.

He turned to Suzie next. She considered putting up a struggle, but she couldn't risk the possibility that he really did have the poison.

"There, that's better." He patted her knee. "Don't bother screaming either. These rooms are quite sound proofed, and I made sure that the rooms all around mine would be empty, for privacy, you know. Can't be too careful." He winked at them, then stepped out the door again.

"Suzie, we have to get out of here." Mary shifted in the ropes that tied her hands. She glanced past her friend, to the window.

“Maybe if we throw the table at it.”

“No, it won’t work.” Suzie took a deep breath as she tried to work her own hands free. They were too far apart to be able to aid each other with the ropes. Mary began to wiggle back and forth in her chair in an attempt to creep towards Suzie.

“Careful Mary, if you tip, you could get hurt.” Suzie watched her with wide wary eyes.

“We have to do something or we’re going to be stuck waiting here until he gets back, and then you know what will happen.” Mary closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she looked towards the bedside table. “Shouldn’t there be a phone?”

Suzie looked in the direction of the table as well, but there was nothing on it, and where a cord should have been the space was empty. He definitely planned all of this out.

“How did we not see this coming?”

“He’s a great actor.” Mary sighed. “I guess if you’re a good actor, you can get away with any lie.”

“Yes, I guess so. It doesn’t make me feel any better about missing it though. I thought Ty was a nice guy.”

“Maybe he was at one point.” Mary shook her head. “Maybe something just snapped inside of him.”

“Maybe.” Suzie frowned, then stretched her wrists against the ropes again. “I think he must have been a boy scout. These knots are impossible.”

“We have to try to stay calm. I’m sure that someone will notice that we’re not at the memorial. Right?”

“If there is a memorial. Remember what Ryan told you? He wasn’t invited. I’m willing to bet it might just be a press conference, where Ty gets to make his speech and gain the sympathy of the entire country.”

“You may be right.” Mary scuffed her feet against the carpet. “If I push back I can tip this chair over.”

“Don’t, you’ll hit the counter.” Suzie looked past her at the small kitchen counter. “You could split your head open.”

“Okay, any ideas?” The exasperation in Mary’s voice indicated she was on the verge of panic.

“There’s a sprinkler system, right? Every motel has one. If we trigger it, then it should set off the fire alarm. They will have to do a room by room search to ensure that everyone is evacuated.”

“But that will take hours, and how are we going to get up there

to trigger the sprinklers?" Mary stared across the table at her.

"You asked for ideas, not good ideas." She closed her eyes and forced a laugh.

"Ugh, Suzie." She fluttered her eyes, then gazed up at the ceiling. "If only one of us was a smoker we might just have a lighter on us."

"Nope, nothing." She shifted in her chair and suddenly felt the rub of something in her pocket. It was the pin with the flower on it that she'd intended to put on her dress when they arrived at the memorial. Since it was in her skirt pocket she was able to bunch up the material enough to drag the pocket close to her fingertips. As she worked the pin free, she gritted her teeth.

"What are you doing?" Mary peered at her.

"I'm not sure. I have a pin in my pocket, I thought maybe I could use it for something."

"A pin isn't going to cut through thick rope." Mary frowned.

"No, it's not." She finally managed to get it free and pinched it between her fingertips. "But it's all I have."

"Maybe you could use it to etch a message into the chair. Maybe someone will notice it, and find out what Ty did." Mary's voice raised a little. "At least, he might be caught then."

"Mary, you're talking as if we're already dead. We're going to get out of here, I know it."

"No, you don't know that." Mary rocked her chair again, back and forth.

"We have to find a way out."

"Suzie, it's too late." Mary tilted her head in the direction of the doorknob as it began to twist. Her stomach twisted much faster and harder. The only person that could be opening it was Ty, which meant that he'd come back to finish them off.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER 16

As the door began to open, Mary closed her eyes. She didn't want to see Ty's smile.

"Wes!" Suzie's exclamation caused Mary's eyes to fly open. She saw Wes move towards her, and in that moment it was the most beautiful sight she could have ever seen.

"Wes, hurry, it's Ty, and he's coming back for us."

"No, he's not sweetheart." He ducked behind her and freed her from the ropes, then he moved on to Suzie's hands. "Are you both okay? He didn't hurt you?" His eyes lingered on Mary.

"No, we're okay. But we should go, Wes, he's coming back." She stood up from the chair and did her best to ignore the quake in her legs.

"No, he's not. He's in the back of Jason's patrol car. He's not going anywhere." He wrapped his arms around her. "I'm sorry you went through this. I'm sorry that I didn't figure everything out before he put his hands on you."

"How did you figure it out?" Suzie stood up and rubbed her wrists.

"I've had my eye on Ty for quite some time. When I was doing research on him I realized he was single. He wasn't even dating around. I thought that was strange. As popular and well-liked as he is, I couldn't figure out why he wouldn't be dating. When I dug deeper into his past I found out he has an old buried charge for stalking. I still didn't quite grasp it, until Jason told me about the bottle you two found in Dune House. We had dogs in there, searching for any trace of the poison that was used to kill Cynthia, but we didn't find anything. It occurred to me that if he stored the poison in a bottle of scented oil there was a good chance the dogs wouldn't be able to detect it."

“You genius!” Mary cupped his cheeks and planted a heavy kiss on his lips.

He laughed as he pulled away from her.

“If I was a genius it wouldn’t have taken me this long to get here, and by the way, your trick is the real reason that Ty was caught.”

“What do you mean?” Suzie raised an eyebrow.

“When the brownies were delivered to the press conference, Ty knocked it out of Brad’s hand and backed away. I think he expected it to be poisoned. I acted as if I knew everything there was to know and had evidence to back it up. He broke down and admitted to everything.” He sought Mary’s eyes with determination. “Mary, I never wanted you to get caught up in any of this.”

“I know you didn’t.” She caressed his cheek and thought about all of the moments she wondered if he’d given up on her. “I’m sorry that I ever doubted you.”

“There was no reason to.” Jason stepped into the room, followed by Paul. Suzie rushed into Paul’s arms, and as he held her close, Jason continued. “Mary, if it wasn’t for Wes, you would have been in handcuffs. He fought hard to keep you from being arrested. Honestly, he went further than I could have.”

“Wes? Is that true?” She looked into his eyes.

“Yes, of course it is. When I was assigned to the case, I knew it would be a conflict, but I thought the best way to protect you would be to investigate the murder myself. I would do anything to protect you, Mary.” He held her a little tighter against his chest.

“But your job, it’s so important.” She frowned. “I would never want you to put it at risk.”

“I love my job, Mary, it’s what I’ve always wanted to do. But I wouldn’t even hesitate to give it up in order to protect you.” He brushed her hair back behind her ear and gazed at her. “Never forget that.”

The two shared a lingering kiss. When they finally broke apart, Mary’s cheeks were bright pink. “Maybe it’s time we gave Cynthia the memorial she really deserves, and hopefully her brother Ryan some peace.”

Suzie led the way out of the motel room. Outside they were greeted by cameras, and reporters eager for a story. But this time, they weren’t going to get some story, they were going to get the truth.

The End

***

Thank you very much for reading the first ten books in the Dune House Cozy Mystery Series. I loved writing them and I hope you enjoyed reading them. Ready for more of Suzie and Mary's sleuthing adventures? Get the next ten books in the Dune House Cozy Mysteries Box Set Books 11 - 20. If you'd like to receive an email when I have a new release, please join my cozy mystery newsletter.

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cindy Bell is a USA Today and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author. She is the author of over one hundred books in twelve series. Her cozies are set in small towns, with lovable animals, quirky characters, delicious food and a touch of romance. She loves writing twisty cozy mysteries that keep readers guessing until the end.

When she is not reading or writing, she loves baking (and eating) sweet treats or walking along the beach with Rufus, her energetic Cocker Spaniel, thinking of the next adventure her characters can embark on.

You can find out more about Cindy's books at www.cindybellbooks.com.

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY CINDY BELL

DUNE HOUSE COZY MYSTERIES

Dune House Cozy Mystery Series 10 Book Box Set (Books 1 - 10)
Dune House Cozy Mystery Series 10 Book Box Set 2 (Books 11 - 20)
Dune House Cozy Mystery Series Boxed Set 1 (Books 1 - 4)
Dune House Cozy Mystery Series Boxed Set 2 (Books 5 - 8)
Dune House Cozy Mystery Series Boxed Set 3 (Books 9 - 12)
Dune House Cozy Mystery Series Boxed Set 4 (Books 13 - 16)
Seaside Secrets
Boats and Bad Guys
Treasured History
Hidden Hideaways
Dodgy Dealings
Suspects and Surprises
Ruffled Feathers
A Fishy Discovery
Danger in the Depths
Celebrities and Chaos
Pups, Pilots and Peril
Tides, Trails and Trouble
Racing and Robberies
Athletes and Alibis
Manuscripts and Deadly Motives
Pelicans, Pier and Poison
Sand, Sea and a Skeleton
Pianos and Prison
Relaxation, Reunions and Revenge

A Tangled Murder

Fame, Food and Murder

Beaches and Betrayal

Fatal Festivities

Sunsets, Smoke and Suspicion

MADDIE MILLS COZY MYSTERIES

Slain at the Sea

Homicide at the Harbor

Corpse at the Christmas Cookie Exchange

LITTLE LEAF CREEK COZY MYSTERIES

Little Leaf Creek Cozy Mystery Series Box Set Vol 1 (Books 1 - 3)

Little Leaf Creek Cozy Mystery Series Box Set Vol 2 (Books 3 - 6)

Little Leaf Creek Cozy Mystery Series Box Set Vol 3 (Books 7 -9)

Chaos in Little Leaf Creek

Peril in Little Leaf Creek

Conflict in Little Leaf Creek

Action in Little Leaf Creek

Vengeance in Little Leaf Creek

Greed in Little Leaf Creek

Surprises in Little Leaf Creek

Missing in Little Leaf Creek

Haunted in Little Leaf Creek

Trouble in Little Leaf Creek

Mayhem In Little Leaf Creek

Cracked in Little Leaf Creek

Stung in Little Leaf Creek

Scandal In Little Leaf Creek

Dead in Little Leaf Creek

Scared in Little Leaf Creek

Felled in Little Leaf Creek

Deceit in Little Leaf Creek

CHOCOLATE CENTERED COZY MYSTERIES

Chocolate Centered Cozy Mystery Series Box Set (Books 1 - 4)

Chocolate Centered Cozy Mystery Series Box Set (Books 5 - 8)

Chocolate Centered Cozy Mystery Series Box Set (Books 9 - 12)

Chocolate Centered Cozy Mystery Series Box Set (Books 13 - 16)

The Sweet Smell of Murder

A Deadly Delicious Delivery

A Bitter Sweet Murder

A Treacherous Tasty Trail

Pastry and Peril

Trouble and Treats

Fudge Films and Felonies

Custom-Made Murder

Skydiving, Soufflés and Sabotage

Christmas Chocolates and Crimes

Hot Chocolate and Homicide

Chocolate Caramels and Conmen

Picnics, Pies and Lies

Devils Food Cake and Drama

Cinnamon and a Corpse

Cherries, Berries and a Body

Christmas Cookies and Criminals

Grapes, Ganache & Guilt

Yule Logs & Murder

Mocha, Marriage and Murder

Holiday Fudge and Homicide

SAGE GARDENS COZY MYSTERIES

Sage Gardens Cozy Mystery Series Box Set Volume 1 (Books 1 - 4)

Sage Gardens Cozy Mystery Series Box Set Volume 2 (Books 5 - 8)

Birthdays Can Be Deadly

Money Can Be Deadly

Trust Can Be Deadly

Ties Can Be Deadly

Rocks Can Be Deadly

Jewelry Can Be Deadly

Numbers Can Be Deadly

Memories Can Be Deadly

Paintings Can Be Deadly

Snow Can Be Deadly

Tea Can Be Deadly

Greed Can Be Deadly

Clutter Can Be Deadly

Cruises Can Be Deadly

Puzzles Can Be Deadly

WAGGING TAIL COZY MYSTERIES

Wagging Tail Cozy Mystery Box Set Volume 1 (Books 1 - 3)

Murder at Pawprint Creek (prequel)

Murder at Pooch Park

Murder at the Pet Boutique

A Merry Murder at St. Bernard Cabins

Murder at the Dog Training Academy

Murder at Corgi Country Club

A Merry Murder on Ruff Road

Murder at Poodle Place

Murder at Hound Hill

Murder at Rover Meadows

Murder at the Pet Expo

Murder on Woof Way

NUTS ABOUT NUTS COZY MYSTERIES

A Tough Case to Crack

A Seed of Doubt

Roasted Peanuts and Peril

Chestnuts, Camping and Culprits

DONUT TRUCK COZY MYSTERIES

Deadly Deals and Donuts

Fatal Festive Donuts

Bunny Donuts and a Body

Strawberry Donuts and Scandal

Frosted Donuts and Fatal Falls

BEKKI THE BEAUTICIAN COZY MYSTERIES

Hairspray and Homicide

A Dyed Blonde and a Dead Body

Mascara and Murder

Pageant and Poison

Conditioner and a Corpse

Mistletoe, Makeup and Murder

Hairpin, Hair Dryer and Homicide

Blush, a Bride and a Body

Shampoo and a Stiff

Cosmetics, a Cruise and a Killer

Lipstick, a Long Iron and Lifeless

Camping, Concealer and Criminals

Treated and Dyed

A Wrinkle-Free Murder

A MACARON PATISSERIE COZY MYSTERY

Sifting for Suspects

Recipes and Revenge

Mansions, Macarons and Murder

HEAVENLY HIGHLAND INN COZY MYSTERIES

Murdering the Roses

Dead in the Daisies

Killing the Carnations

Drowning the Daffodils

Suffocating the Sunflowers

Books, Bullets and Blooms

A Deadly Serious Gardening Contest

A Bridal Bouquet and a Body

Digging for Dirt

WENDY THE WEDDING PLANNER COZY MYSTERIES

Matrimony, Money and Murder

Chefs, Ceremonies and Crimes

Knives and Nuptials

Mice, Marriage and Murder

OceanofPDF.com